

Ai No Kusabi

The Space Between

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Ai No Kusabi ***The Space Between***

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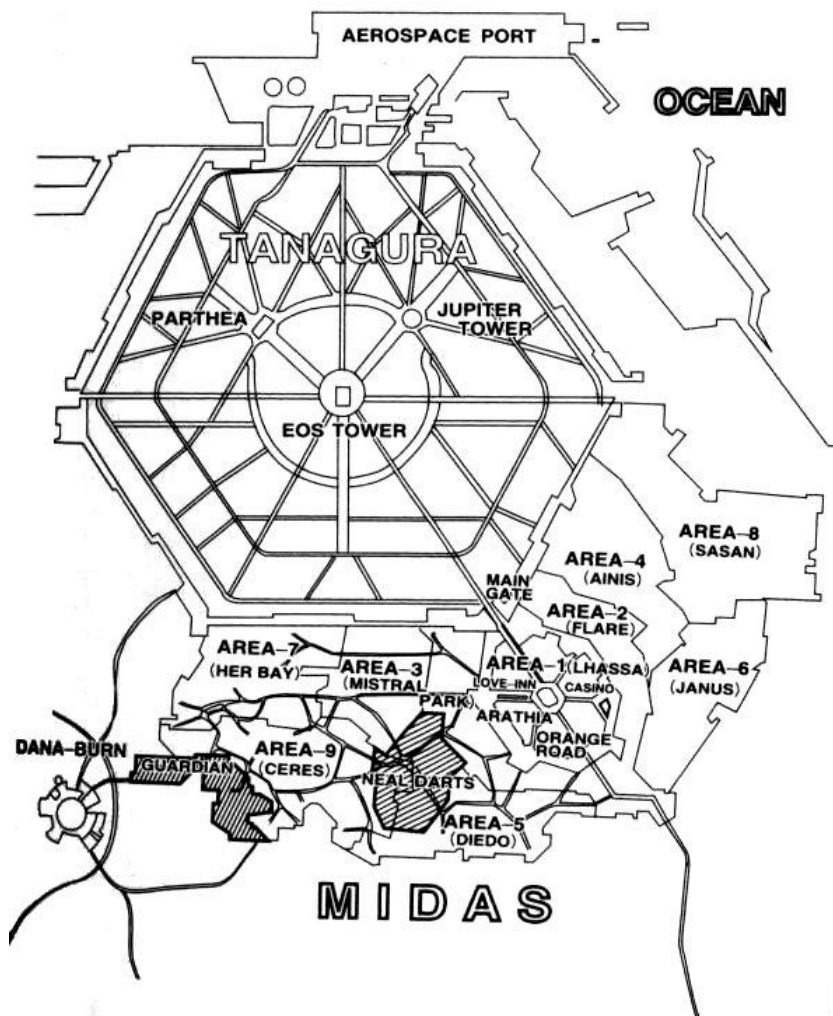
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Prologue

Tanagura.

A digitized megapolis of perfect, mechanistic order, where the mark of time is flawless, implacable. At the unbeating heart of this city exists a singular exception to this scripted precision; a human presence within the palace tower of Eos.

The absence of a year and a half marks Riki's return to Eos... a return brought about by capture. As punishment for his escape, Riki was leashed to be paraded outside two hours a day for a month in the company of the furniture Cal, on the pretext of "walking the grounds."

The sight of it was nothing short of scandalous.

Considering the average age of an Eos pet was thirteen, the return of a fully mature male like Riki to the pleasures of Eos was absolutely unheard of. Riki's second, shameless appearance in a Bacchanalia and the spectacle of Iason's performance had stunned pets and elites alike.

Perhaps it was depravity.

Perhaps it was the height of experimentation.

Or a challenge to the existing order.

No one could possibly understand the mind of Iason.

At the Bacchanalia, Riki was subjected to the grip of the Type D pet ring in the midst of the shocked spectators. Brought to the edge of insanity, Riki ceased to care about his actions or surroundings. The looks of hatred and envy from the pets directed at him now spoke volumes.

Once the carnality of the relationship between Iason and Riki was

revealed, the impact went far beyond what it was before.

That slumdog.

Why?

Why is he so special?

This can't be.

This is unforgivable!

Not that it matters to Riki, who is above such pettiness and distraction. But no matter where he goes in the tower, the venomous looks follow. Wherever he turns, the hostility lingers at the edge of his sight.

The rancor against the slumdog in the first three years of Riki's captivity was open, vocal and ruthless. This silent, pervasive hate after his capture and return is far more raw and visceral.

But this is not the reason why, for the last five days, Riki has not set foot in the salon.

Evening.

Per his usual routine, Riki had finished dining and was in his private room reading a dataslate. The door slid open without warning. There was no expectation of privacy; the keylock could only be enabled from the outside, not inside.

With languid steps, Iason approached the bedside.

In Eos, when owners return, pets are expected to run to the door and show affection; but everything here is different. The furniture Cal bowed with the words, "Welcome home, master."

Riki never rose to greet his owner. Iason paid no mind but walked to Riki's bed directly.

At first completely taken aback by such blatant disregard for the norms of Eos, Cal learned to understand that there was a special relationship between this master and pet. Cal understood that nothing he knew as truth applied here.

"You have not set foot outside these quarters at all today."

Just returned from a diplomatic mission with Aisha to the planet Jibril, Iason spoke in measured tones as he removed his silk gloves.

Every aspect of Riki's life was reported without fail to Iason by Cal. Without a doubt no master understood his pet better than Iason anywhere in Eos.

Powering off the dataslate, Riki glared at Iason. "What do you expect me to do? Babysit those kids in the salon?" The resentment in his voice was reflexive. Riki caught himself.

I know better.

The realization gnawed on him.

"A slumdog like me, over the age of twenty, a pet in fucking Eos? I don't want to walk around being stared at like some freak show. I'm through with that. Fucking through."

The words came out with spite. There was no denying the reality of it.

"Our troublemaker at last shows sign of progress," Iason remarked with a faint trace of irony. "Not that I care."

With a gesture like a caress, Iason took Riki's chin in his hand.

"As long as you understand you are my pet."

Riki's eyes clouded over.

"Fuck that, after what you did to me at the Bacchanalia. I don't want to understand shit."

Riki struggled against the memory.

At his first Bacchanalia, Riki was drugged with a powerful aphrodisiac that rendered him incapable of remembering most of what happened. The depraved, lecherous acts he did... he heard about from the other pets in malicious, envious tones long after that.

Not that Riki cared; he couldn't be held responsible for what happened under the influence.

But the Bacchanalia yesterday... Riki remembered everything; there was no denying it. As if reading his thoughts Iason said: "Do not forget it."

With those words, Iason placed his other hand on Riki's crotch. Riki had already showered and dressed for bed. His nightclothes offered no resistance to Iason's touch.

Riki bit down on his voice and struggled to sit up.

"As long as the pet ring bites down on you—you are mine. No matter who says what, no matter what you think or who you think of."

Riki's fate was encircled by the pet ring; it was a statement of fact. There was no escape.

He glared.

Before Riki could say another word his mouth was sealed by a kiss from Iason.

Riki was taken aback—it was not the usual kiss that overwhelmed his lips. It was a kiss that enfolded the mouth tenderly.

What?

The kiss became deeper. Persistent, more passionate—and gentle.

What is this?

Riki had no answer for these sensations; his fingers trembled. Without understanding what to do, Riki clenched the bedsheets in his hands.



Chapter 1

The depths of a crowded bar.

It was the second time Guy had set foot there.

"Why, long time no see."

Lavi was a databroker without peer, but his crooked attitude, razor-sharp tongue, and sense that he always had something up his sleeve earned him the sobriquet "Django"—after a character in an ancient story who forever drags a coffin behind him. If it weren't for hearing Riki's stories about Lavi's days under the Guardians, Guy would have thought Lavi's reputation a carefully constructed front.

In contrast to the ease of Lavi's voice, his partner Thor glared. "So you're back," he spat.

Guy found it hard to keep an even face.

When Riki returned to the slums broken from parts unknown, Thor had tried to start something with Riki—and paid for it. Now he extended that open hostility to Guy.

No one knew whether he was a sinker—a refugee. While it was public knowledge that Zae was an offworlder, Zac looked the part of a slumdog so well that everyone forgot his origins, even though Zae didn't bother to hide the fact.

But Thor was the exact opposite of Zac in every way. Thor kept his secrets. And Lavi accepted that.

Guy had no interest in this. Lavi was a databroker; what he did in private was not Guy's concern. *Stop being so fucking hostile*, is what Guy wanted to say—but it was apparent Thor transferred his hatred of Riki onto Guy.

"This is quite the situation," Lavi said from his sofa.

Knowing Lavi was talking about Kirie, Guy sighed.

Two full months had passed, but no one had stopped talking about it in the slums.

After Midas Police Constables crossed the border into Ceres and crashed the slums, it became everybody's business. The unwritten rule was that even if you screwed up in Midas, if you ran to the slums you were in the clear—that no longer held, and it became clear that it never had.

Ceres residents—especially thrillseekers who cruised the streets for kicks—saw the danger as immediate and personal.

Fuck Kirie, fuck him, kill the fucker.

The slums roared with that chant. Even those not involved in the underworld felt that way.

Kirie was such a backstabber he was no stranger to being hated—but this was over the top even for him.

I can do it.

Riki did it, I can too.

I'll do anything to get ahead. Anything.

Egotistical, ambitious, overconfident—that was Kirie. But that's not what made Kirie famous. Neither that nor his heterochromia, which earned him the nickname of "Odd-Eyed Kirie."

No, it was screwing up that did it. Screwing up big.

Guy and his crew found themselves in a bind. Kirie was a backstabbing opportunist who ran with them only once in a while and was worth more trouble alive than dead. But to the slums, Kirie ran with Bison—even if Bison no longer existed. Guilt by association.

After crushing their rival gang Zekes, Guy and his crew were reluctant heroes for a time in Ceres—but no doubt that respect was long gone. Because no one knew the truth of what Kirie did to be chased into Ceres by the MPC, there was no end to those who held

Bison responsible.

Not like anyone would dare do anything in public over it. Guy and his crew couldn't care less. They had more pressing issues to take care of.

Like finding out where Riki had vanished to.

During the incident, while Guy and his crew were fighting it out with the MPC, Riki was snatched out of Ceres and vanished—all trace of him gone.

Now the crazy rumors were endless. Rumors only worth laughing at, rumors which needed to be taken seriously—denying any of them was pointless. More rumors inevitably followed, feeding on each other. Some were already urban legend.

Guy couldn't believe that fight over Kirie would lead to Riki vanishing that same day.

You have to be kidding me. What for? Why?

Guy ignored Riki's email and calls that day. Because he was so frustrated he wanted time to cool down.

It's Kirie's fault.

No matter how it was cut, that's what it came down to.

But there was something missing—answers to the relationship between Riki and Scarface.

Three years. Three missing years Guy knew nothing about. Their weight came crashing down on him.

Guy was afraid. Afraid he'd say something in the heat of the moment and lash out at Riki, not just about Kirie but about everything else—so he'd kept quiet before he said something he could never take back.

And now Riki was gone.

Guy's stomach knotted.

There was no official word on Kirie's whereabouts, which was why the rumors were uncontrollable. Scarface said it himself:

"With a bounty on Kirie's head, everyone in the slums will be looking for him."

And that was exactly what happened. Not that the Ceres Police Constables were offering any such reward, but the rumor alone turned Kirie into the most wanted man in the slums overnight.

After all, taking Kirie and beating him to a pulp wouldn't hint anyone's conscience. On the contrary, it would be a chance to earn prestige in the slums.

For Guy, the thought of being manipulated by Scarface made his teeth grate.

And now, rumors swirled around not just Kirie but Riki.

"What is the truth?" Lavi asked nonchalantly, but his eyes were sharp.

"What?"

"So how deep was Riki in?"

Lavi was sawy enough to ask about Riki but not Bison—or maybe his interests lay elsewhere.

"We weren't involved in anything."

Guy wasn't in the mood to play dumb in front of Lavi.

"Really?"

"Whether you believe it or not, your call."

Silence.

"Well, if Riki was involved it wouldn't be such a huge mess," Lavi said contentedly.

Guy narrowed his eyes.

"Why do you think so?"

"Kirie just wanted to copycat Riki right? It isn't easy for a slummer to rise to the top. Even Riki was broken, right?"

Ceres wasn't even marked on the official maps. For slummers to get out without an ID was close to impossible.

Or maybe Riki could do the impossible?

It was every slummer's dream.

Everyone wanted to know why Riki broke, but it was a mystery. Even broken, Riki's charisma was overpowering.

"All it took was one bad roll of the dice. Kirie talked a good game but he was all talk, wasn't he?"

Everyone had seen that.

Riki never said he was meant for greatness, but he lived it. That was what made Bison great.

Kirie was the opposite. He couldn't see the difference between having what it took and just being lucky, and fell apart.

"Riki was stoic and charismatic, Kirie was a narcissistic loser. That about sums it up."

No one thought Lavi would say such words.

"Do you know something?" Guy asked.

Maybe Lavi knew everything, whether fact or fiction. Maybe secrets of Riki's not even Guy was aware of.

"I want to know everything. Information is best when fresh and accurate."

Lavi smiled disingenuously.

"I don't know if this information is worth anything to you, but if you feel like it, I will exchange it for what you know without charge?"

Lavi had a mind like a steel trap.

With regard to Kirie, Guy knew things not even the others knew. Things he could say, but didn't want to say. Guy didn't think of secrets as cash.

Lavi knew better. Databrokers existed because people bought information. Someone would always pay for it, like the way Guy bought information he used in the war against the Zekes.

"You don't just sell information but buy it?"

"Correct. Rumors, I can just pub crawl and pick up. Truth takes more effort. And information regarding this... if it came from someone close to it, it will sell high."

"But you decide how and to who that information is sold... right?"

"Right."

"You divulge private conversations as well?"

"I protect my sources," Lavi spat. "But I can't be responsible for someone putting two and two together."

"Stop wasting time and get down to business," Thor said with venom.

Lavi tilted his head at the interruption.

"And what information do you want?"

Lavi was all business now. Guy paused.

"I want to know a few things. One, whether there was a mass fatality crash in Midas involving tourists. Two, anything you have on a guy named Katze with a scar on his left cheek. Three, whether there are better databrokers than you."

Lavi paused before answering. "You say the most fucked up things." Coming from Lavi, this was irony at its finest.

"Did I put a dent in your ego, Django?"

Lavi's eyes were harsher than his words.

"You in deep that badly? And this involves Riki disappearing?"

Guy was speechless. He thought it would just be a straight business transaction. Was Lavi asking because this was about Riki?

"You in love with Riki?" Guy asked.

"What?!" Thor said, outraged.

Guy remembered—this guy was Lavi's partner.

Too late to take it back now.

Guy couldn't imagine Lavi sharing anything that looked like emotions with anyone else—but then he remembered: Lavi's first love was Riki. It was when they were both under the Guardians, but only a few people knew. Apparently Thor was one of them.

"It's not that. Maybe something like friendship?"

Lavi denied it quietly. Knowing it was something Lavi would never talk about, Guy's face clouded.

"Worse than a bad love story." Guy meant every word.

If you can't be mine, I want you to hate me. I want to leave scars in your heart that will never heal, Riki.

That twisted declaration of love from Kirie to Riki was foremost in Guy's mind.

"Like something from your Guardian days?"

Guy furrowed his brow and lowered his voice. What happened then... not even Guy knew. Riki didn't want to talk about it. Riki hurt, and Guy could never share that pain.

"My days, not yours."

Lavi's words grated on Guy.

"No one knows what went on with Haruka. Cher is dead, Yunka vanished. It's just me and Riki left. In that sense, we're special."

It was this unchangeable past that bound Lavi to Riki.

"But yeah... even after all that, to be paired with Riki says something about you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that."

Even in their Guardian days, rumors of a relationship between Guy and Riki were there. No one would believe the denials; eventually, Guy was moved to a different block.

Whether it was a Block Sister or Block Mother in the Guardians, no one asked the truth of it of Guy. The rumor itself was enough. Riki and Guy were infuriated, but children had no rights under the Guardians.

Guy couldn't speak for their blockmates, but he knew Riki had no love lost for the Guardians.

"Can you take the job or not?"

"If you pay." Lavi's pride as databroker drove his answer.

"Then it's settled."

"Done."

Lavi was not one for small talk.

"Get the fuck out of here," Thor said agitatedly.

Guy didn't want to talk over old times with Lavi either. Not that there were old times anyways. Without Riki, there would be no ties to Lavi anyhow. That was true for Lavi as well. All Lavi was

interested in was Riki.

Without Riki, Guy and Lavi would never have met like this, or touched so close to the past. But that was Riki. His fire drew people to him, each with their own emotions.

Riki was gone. The one who hungered and felt his absence the most was Guy.

Chapter 2

Eos, Apex Level.

Where only thirteen Blondies were allowed to maintain residence.

That day, having finished breakfast much later than usual, Riki was dabbing his lips with a napkin; as if on cue, the furniture Cal spoke:

"There is a message from the master."

"What?"

After two months, Cal was used to the brusqueness.

"You are to arrive by 1500 at the medical center." There was no mistaking those words. Maybe Riki's sense of discord was because this room was different and it was Cal, not Daryl talking to him.

"Karuga?"

"No, the main block."

Riki furrowed his brow. The monthly medical checks required of pets were held at the Karuga-84 facility. This was different.

"Why?" Riki asked.

"I have not heard," Cal responded.

Iason's commands left no room for doubt. No matter what the instructions, pets and furniture had no right of denial or refusal. Riki had paid the price of resistance and the fear of punishment permeated to his core. No doubt Cal shared the same fear.

In Cal's eyes there was a hint of fear deep inside. This was different from the sense of unfathomable distance in Daryl's gaze. More than ever, Riki felt keenly his status as Iason's pet.

"Alright."

"I will escort you to the center," said Cal.

In other words, on a leash. The norm for a medical visit.

When Riki nodded, Cal breathed a small sigh of relief. In that gesture, Riki saw the signs of inexperience.

Katze once mentioned that all Eos furniture was selected from teenagers in care of the Guardians. Riki had no reason to doubt this. Cal had been furniture for scarcely two years.

When Riki first stepped into Iason's residence, Daryl set the tone with his youthful exterior and experienced calm. Unaware of what the standards were to be Blondie furniture, Cal seemed to fall short in every way. Or maybe Riki just got older, but Riki was an exception to everything in Eos.

With his black leather collar and leash, Riki cut a figure walking through the salon as passing pets eyed him with both curiosity and hate. Since the medical center and salon were located on the same floor, the sight of a collared pet was normal—except that everything about the twenty-year old Riki was not normal.

Even with a year and a half absence, Riki knew the route to the medical center better than Cal, so Riki led the way. Cal's hand on the leash was shaking visibly.

When sentenced to walk the salon for a month, the sight of a pet with nervous furniture in tow was already beyond the pale. For a furniture's first pet to be the notorious troublomaker of Eos was too much for Cal.

But a walk to the main block of the medical center rather than Karuga-84 was new for Riki.

On arrival, Riki's collar was loosened. He was then guided by a medical android to the elevator.

What is this about?

Even if questioning the motives of Iason was pointless, knowing there was always a reason behind everything Iason did unnerved

Riki.

Room number RS-35.

The door slid open and Riki stood there, speechless.

In the center of the room, reclined on a sofa, was Iason. Seated next to him in the uniform of a Blondy worn rakishly was Raoul. Just that made the room different.

But what rendered Riki speechless wasn't that—it was the figure seated between the two Blondies.

Kirie?!

The reason for Riki's bitter fight and separation from Guy in the flesh. But this was not Ceres or Midas. This was Eos.

How? Why?

The cause of the fatal hovercar crash in Midas.

The object of a bounty on his head.

Bearing secrets from the Guardian days.

The reason the MPC crashed the slums in force.

Kirie.

Riki remembered Katze was the one searching high and low for Kirie. And it was obvious that Katze had captured Kirie—so Riki forgot about Kirie entirely.

But why this? Is this even real?

Riki struggled with the questions. Questions circled in his mind. His pulse quickened.

As if seeing through Riki's confusion, a voice called out: "Why are you just standing there? Why not come sit with us?" Said Raoul

with the faintest of smiles.

With the Mimea incident... even before that, Riki was aware Raoul despised him. Even more than Iason's silence, Raoul's overt kindness unnerved him.

Reflexively staring back at Raoul, Riki slumped against a wall.

You have to be fucking kidding me.

Riki's hatred towards Kirie hadn't vanished. Riki didn't understand what this was about but had no intention of being played.

As if predicting that attitude of his, Raoul smirked.

Riki didn't even bother hiding his annoyance. Only the uncomfortable silence remained.

Then Riki noticed something about Kirie.

Kirie—arrogant, conceited Kirie, was seated quietly as if nothing was amiss. And then Kirie laughed and rose to his feet. *This can't be Kirie*, Riki thought. *The whole scene is wrong. It is Kirie, but not Kirie.*

Kirie smiled, a sweet yet poisonous look that riveted Riki in place. With the promise of physical delights, Kirie sauntered over to Riki. Riki was transfixed by the sight.

Kirie's eyes, hands, and breath... on him. The sensations engulfed Riki's senses.

This can't be.

The warmth of Kirie's body on his. The press, the touch, the pounding heartbeat... Riki recoiled from it all, his back to the wall, fighting the carnal instinct rising inside of him.

At that moment a sharp, wrenching pain assaulted Riki's crotch.

Riki shoved Kirie aside and twisted away from him, hands on his crotch, and fell to the ground.

Kirie stared blankly down at Riki, as if he had no memory of being rejected by him.

Cold sweat broke out on Riki. Doubled over and moaning in pain, Riki was conscious of Raoul looking down on him for a long moment. "Why don't you let him be? They haven't even kissed."

"All I did was demonstrate what would happen," Iason replied flatly, twisting the control ring on his left hand slowly, sending pulses into the Type-D pet ring mounted at the root of Riki's penis. With a flick, Iason could torture Riki endlessly or make him black out.

The pain ceased. Riki breathed raggedly. The ringing in his ears was constant. The torture of the pet ring was something he hadn't felt in a while—but was all too familiar to him.

"Well, there is room for improvement—but it will do. It even excited your pet a little," Raoul said wickedly. Iason responded with a cold silence.

"Don't look at me like that—it won't happen again, I assure you." Raoul said cheerily.

"Kirie!"

Raoul's voice cracked like a whip. As if some switch had been triggered, Kirie turned around.



Riki watched as Raoul exited the room with his hand on Kirie's

shoulder, eyes blurred from the pain.

"Why turn Kirie into an Alita? To give to some old bastard for a fucktoy?" Riki said acidly.

He didn't care if that was the case. He had no sympathy for Kirie.

Riki was bitter at being made an example of by Raoul, who no doubt still harbored a grudge over Mimea. Iason knew this but still let Raoul use Kirie to bait Riki. That was what made Riki angry.

"It is a waste to liquidate a specimen with natural heterochromia," Iason said coldly.

Iason would likely never speak of what happened with Kirie to Riki. Not that Riki cared. If whatever Kirie did meant he was reduced to exist as an automaton, then that was the price Kirie paid.

"Power breeds a lust for pleasure. That specimen will serve someone as a splendid plaything in their collection," Iason said without emotion. In Eos, Iason was renowned for his impeccable taste in pets; but behind that suave exterior lay a ruthlessness that Katze once described as *chilling down to the bone*, Riki shivered.

"Never mind that—Riki, I have something to show you." Iason waved a holoscreen on.

"This was found in Kirie's memories."

For Iason, whose immortal body was inorganic, and whose only remaining concession to humanity was his brain—slumdogs were nothing but fit for experimentation. Not that Riki would ever forget that, but nothing prepared him for what he saw.

On the holoscreen were two males engaged in sex. One of them was Kirie. Riki suppressed his disgust.

I don't care who he fucked.

It was probably Kirie's memory of when he seduced that teenager in the Guardians. Riki had no interest in Kirie's conquests, but when he saw the other male's face, his blood froze.

The dark-haired male having his testes fondled by Kirie was Riki.

The sweat beading on his black hair, the taut, red nipples, the penis arched onto the stomach—it was Riki.

Riki could not believe his eyes. His vision blurred. His mind screamed denial.

If this was Guy and not Kirie clawing at his back, Riki would ask how the footage could exist—but this was Kirie.

And that wasn't Riki.

"No, this is not me! No! No!"

As Kirie thrust ever deeper into the Riki on the holoscreen, Riki screamed at the image, willing it away.

"Kirie ejaculated multiple times when this memory was replayed, without any physical contact on his genitalia," Iason spoke matter-of-factly.

Riki knew it wasn't himself, but couldn't help but feel he was being shown a warped, lecherous version of himself.

"That is not me! No! Never!"

The holoscreen vanished.

"I didn't fuck Kirie! Dammit! I didn't fuck Kirie!"

When Riki returned to the slums, he thought he could recover the three years he'd lost. But he couldn't. He couldn't even bring himself to try—not even with Guy. Riki felt if he tried to have sex the perverted pet he'd become would assert itself, and he couldn't bear to show that side of himself to anyone. But returning to Eos—on hearing Iason's voice again—all of Riki's sanity and restraint collapsed.

"That wasn't me!"

Riki thought of Mimea. He didn't want to experience the agony of

being wrongly accused all over again.

Iason laughed.

"This must be familiar to you, Riki. Or do you fear being punished again?"

Riki bit his lip but did not avert his gaze. He would never admit to this. Ever.

"I didn't do it!"

Even if it was futile, Riki would say it. If that was a memory of Kirie's, then Kirie was delusional. Kirie couldn't tell reality from fantasy; he lived in a world of constant nightmares. If Katze's information was correct, Kirie's partner was a ward of the Guardians.

"Kirie wanted you. Very badly, I might add, to have constructed such a fantasy."

"Fantasy?"

"Yes." Iason crossed his legs on the sofa. "When Kirie was captured he was incoherent. So sedatives were introduced into his system."

Kirie was already broken long ago. All that was left in him was the desire to not die, Riki thought.

"The human brain is strange. When chemical interrogation is induced, it creates a fantasy world as a defense."

"Defense?"

"Yes, fantasizing about sex with you was comfortable for him, and to break him out of that was quite the struggle." Iason's brow furrowed in distaste.

Riki was furious.

That night—

Beaten by the MPC, legs shaking, drenched from the torrential rain, Riki returned to his room to find Kirie in his closet, eyes wide with fright.

Help me, were the words out of Kirie, followed by, *I love you*. That warped confession of love was followed by the words, *If you ignore me, I prefer to be hated by you forever*.

To think Kirie maintained such a fantasy in the depths of his twisted mind disgusted Riki. Even if sex in all its forms whether consensual or violent was commonplace in the slums, if Kirie had said those words with a straight face Riki would have put him down then and there.

To be propositioned by Luke didn't raise issues at all with Riki, but Kirie was something else. Because for Kirie, even sex was a means for personal advancement at the expense of someone else.

"Did you know it was Kirie's fantasy from the start?" Riki asked without thinking.

At least when he was with Mimea, no one walked in on Riki. But the punishment for that was beyond imagining and brutal. So even if it was delusional, it was real to the eyes of Iason on the screen—and how would he react? The thought cut Riki down to the quick.

"I did feel the urge to strangle when I saw that at first," Iason said nonchalantly, startling Riki.

Choke who? Kirie? Me?

"But I knew it wasn't you immediately."

Iason's lips curved wickedly.

"The way you moan, the way you twist, your face when ejaculating are completely different," Iason said. Riki felt the heat rise to his cheeks in shame and anger.

Bastard.

"Then why did you show me that disgusting shit?"

"To make you understand."

"Understand what?"

"There are no second chances." Iason's eyes were cold as ice. The voice stabbed right through Riki.

"Do you remember what I said before?"

"What?"

"The rules for the salon."

In most cases, anything went in the salon—but Iason was talking about a different set of rules.

"You mean don't push it, right?"

"Yes."

"Any scandal, no matter the cause, no excuse. Immediate punishment—right?"

Not that anyone would pick a fight with Riki now.

"So now you don't need me, right? Should I have Cal pick me up?"

"Do not concern yourself. I will take you home myself."

"Leashed?"

"Of course."

With a sigh, Riki lowered his gaze.

Chapter 3

Eos. Salon Level.

Riki descended the grav elevator out into the salon, and conversation ceased.

It's him.

Riki.

That slumdog.

The whispers were loaded with envy.

No.

Can't be.

Why?

Seeing the love bites on Riki, the indignation rose.

Why?

How?

Impossible!

All eyes saw that Riki, who hadn't appeared at a breeding patty once since the last Bacchanalia, enjoyed the nightly attentions of Iason in the proof of those marks on his skin.

Slumdog!

How can this be?

Haw is he special?!

Teeth gnashed in envy. Riki was used to this. Pets in Eos were immature and rumors never stopped. To the pets, Riki was an

intruder into their world they would never understand.

But even as much of a nuisance as the pets were, a week of being trapped in a room was all Riki could stand.

The slum quarters Riki had been used to were narrow, old, dirty, and insecure—but even thinking about them now was pointless.

Iason's residence was spacious, exquisite, clean. And on top of that, three luxurious meals a day served by Cal. Riki lacked for nothing in Eos. Except freedom.

Nothing had changed for Riki here in Eos at all.

In the slums, Riki was on his own, free to walk his own personal path to damnation. In Eos, his role was subservience to Iason, without choice.

But under Iason, Riki had the power to protest his fate, to say "No" even if it was hopeless. That Riki was able to project his own personal feelings into the relationship between master and pet was what separated Riki from the other pets in Eos. Of course, Riki like them was forced to exist as a pet, and at the mercy of Iason.

Eighteen months of absence from the salon had changed Riki. Time away had rounded the hard edges from the troublemaker—or perhaps it was too much to call change.

It was all Riki could do before to keep a grip on his identity and his sanity, but thanks to his time spent back in the slums, Riki now understood Eos in a way not possible before. Or maybe this new perspective was something forced on him only by circumstance, a product of emotion rather than introspection. But it was no great thing now for Riki to take what vexed him in Eos and walk away from it.

Iason called this "great progress," but for Riki pointless fights weren't in his interest. Neither was punishment from Iason.

Regardless of what Riki wanted others had a strong reaction to him, so it was pointless to blame him for his predicament. Whether Riki was innocent or not was of no consequence. But Iason's words

lingered in Riki's mind.

You should know better by now.

It frustrated Riki no end that even innocent words had layers of hidden meaning under Iason. Even knowing it was pointless to read into them, Iason's words wouldn't leave Riki's mind. All Riki cared about was to not get into petty fights with immature pets and be subjected to Iason's wrath.

It was good to not be at the center of every scandal for a change. Even if the eyes of the other pets never left him, Riki ignored them and walked purposefully to his destination.

Garden Level.

Encompassing the entire level was a verdant space with an endless expanse of soothing flowers. For pets kept illiterate, walking its spaces was part of their education on aesthetics and cleanliness.

Access was unrestricted, but the portal led to a passageway where contaminants from the outside were ruthlessly purged. Sensors were emplaced to prevent organic matter from exiting the level; not even a petal ever made its way outside.

Riki had no interest in pet politics in the salon. Other than exercise facilities, this was the only place he frequented.

The garden was an enclosed space but had a pond and brooks, small birds and animals. Riki could stare at them for hours. With him he had his dataslate with a guide to plants downloaded for access. If he felt like it, he could stop to check the name of a particular flower. Riki would've preferred access to the neural network instead, but that was impossible—even the dataslate was a hard-fought concession.

Mimea taught him about the garden.

Boys like the salon, but I like it here.

Riki knew her favorite flower by heart: *Clarissa Mellow Lavinia*. A gaudy flower with seven colors to its name.

Isn't it beautiful?

Mimea's eyes sparkled. Riki had no interest in flowers. A slumdog had no use for beauty; without utility, there was no purpose for anything in the slums.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to know this flower's name?

Mimea smiled innocently.

Mimea was gone.

Why is everyone trying to break as apart?

The memory of those words. The pain, the regret. Before she vanished—forever.

What happened to Mimea after that, Riki didn't know. After emerging from a month of incarceration and torture, there was no Mimea, just rumors.

In this garden, Riki remembered Mimea. He relived the memories.

So that he never forgot the pain, Riki came to the garden. Knowing all too well the past couldn't be undone.

Dataslate in hand, Riki was glared at by the other pets. As if he was an intruder in their paradise.

Riki paid them no attention. It didn't matter to him whether they took it as conceit. Riki was past caring.

"Hello."

Engrossed in looking for the name of a flower, Riki ignored the voice.

"Excuse me." The voice became more distinct.

Convinced it was meant for someone else, Riki continued searching

the dataslate.

"You do hear me, right?" The voice was insistent now.

Riki took his eyes off the dataslate. Looking to his left and right, he saw no one else close.

Is that voice for me? Riki turned around.

"I was talking to you," the voice said sullenly. The voice came from an ash-blond boy with a vibrant tan.

Flashback.

Paradita?

Riki remembered. Blond hair in waves. Eyes the color of emeralds. No idea who his owner was but definitely Paradita breed. Riki saw him—was it two years ago?—at the Bacchanalia.

New pets were everywhere, but the Paradita had the most unique coloration. Riki was reclined at Iason's feet listening to music on earbuds, but he remembered him. Paraditas were a cross between the Melrose and Dalton breeds and males were exceedingly rare.

Normally, Melrose hybrids only bred females with a 99% probability. Males invariably developed skin mutations and had a low rate of survival. Paraditas were a middle-ranked breed, but rarity made male hybrids valuable. In auctions, they ranked as high as specimens of Academy breed.

But that's not why Riki remembered the Paradita.

"Why did you ignore me?"

It wasn't intentional. No one talked to Riki. No pet was crazy enough.

"What do you mean?" Riki replied.

"Do you remember me?"

"You're the Paradita, right?" Riki said in a laconic tone.

The Paradita continued nervously, "I'm Miguel."

"Oh yeah. Miguel. Right."

Riki remembered now; after the first Bacchanalia, they'd met here by chance in the garden. The same tremulous voice, the same shyness. Back then Riki thought it was some sort of prank, some dare thought up by a pet clique. That Riki was the object of a dare was nothing more than an endless source of annoyance.

Most pets broke down and cried, or ran in fear, to derision from their fellow pets. No pet in its right mind would talk to the vicious slumdog, after all. But Miguel was different. He'd carried on:

"I just got here, and I'm lost."



Riki had been at a loss for words. Any pet should be able to figure

out Riki was feared and loathed at a glance. Not Miguel.

"Everyone stares at me."

Because he was a Paradita, and that drew as much attention as Riki did. Pets were by their very nature ostentatious, but nothing quite stood out like a Paradita.

"Simon said... I'd find friends here... but I don't know where to go and I ended up here by this flower bed."

So Riki told him he should be taught by his furniture what the rules of Eos were.

1. Do not get uppity and out of line
2. Do not get cocky and show off
3. Wrap something long around you

Entirely different from the Eos Pet Code consisting of 9 Articles. Riki didn't even know who came up with these rules. Daryl was the one who'd told him about them, of course in much more graceful language. Maybe it was Daryl looking out for Riki, trying to get him to belong, to not get into trouble in the salon—not that it had worked out.

Riki wasn't by nature a Samaritan, but he was in rare form that day. Maybe it was because it was obvious that Miguel wasn't part of any clique. Riki added one last rule:

4. Do not go near the slumdog

Even if Riki didn't put it to words, no doubt Miguel's furniture would say so. But Miguel from beginning to end was a rarity.

"Do you work here?"

Miguel had thought Riki was a gardener.

At the time, Riki as a nineteen-year-old was totally outside the norm of any pet in Eos. No pet was kept to Riki's age, ever. Pets

were cast aside long before they ever reached that age. Miguel was just thirteen, so to his inexperienced eyes Riki didn't look like a pet. Instead of making Riki mad, it made him laugh. It was the only time Riki had ever laughed in Eos.

Back to the present.

"I'm sorry about before." Miguel lowered his eyes.

After two years, Miguel was still the same.

"I didn't know you were Lord Iason's pet. I thought you were a gardener."

Are you kidding me? Riki was astonished.

"I asked Simon about you and he turned pale."

Not because you thought I was a gardener, but because he was afraid I'd tainted you somehow, Riki thought.

That Riki could even think this meant he knew full well what his position in Eos was as the outsider, the troublemaker. The one who refused to act in a manner befitting the pet of a Blondy.

"I came here many times after that, but I could never find you."

Probably because I broke out of Eos right after that. Riki and Miguel would never have met again under ordinary circumstances. Either the ostracism of the other pets or Miguel's furniture would have seen to that.

"I never thought I would meet you again like this. I heard you were... disposed of."

Riki had thought he was done with Eos as well. Until his capture, when Iason put his pet registration back into his face.

"And?" Riki replied brusquely. They might have met before, but Riki had nothing in common with Miguel.

"Can I stay with you?"

"What?"

Riki stared at Miguel.

"I won't get in your way, I promise."

"It's not about that. Do you have any idea who I am?"

"You're Lord Iason's pet."

"Didn't anyone warn you against associating with the 'slumdog'?
Your furniture maybe?"

Miguel went silent.

"I don't babysit kids."

Riki powered down his dataslate and walked away.

He came to the garden to not be bothered by anyone. Being trapped in Iason's residence with Cal wasn't to his liking. Cal hid his discomfort but the tension was still there.

Riki wasn't concerned about Cal's feelings, but for Riki it was better to enjoy the pretense of freedom outside rather than be trapped in a cage. Unlike the salon, Riki could hide in the garden.

It was quiet and no one looked for him here. To Riki this was as close as it got to paradise. His arrival at set times meant other pets went out of their way to absent themselves. Now Miguel was here, but Riki had no means to banish him from the garden. This was a public space.

Riki just wanted to be left alone. Nothing else. Riki had no idea what Miguel came for, but he didn't care to find out.

Chapter 4

Evening.

A reception for the Ambassador of the 7th Gildeas Confederation was held at the Parthian Consulate.

The host was Gideon, and in his capacity as chief of information Iason was at the reception, which ended smoothly. The aircar returned Iason to Eos—not to his residence, but to where Orphe was waiting in office quarters.

Having sent word of his arrival by holochannel, Iason stepped forth from the grav elevator into the company of Orphe's honor guard.

Each Blondy office had its own individual character. Orphe's was no exception to this; the décor was chic and elegant. What was different this time was the presence of Aisha.

What is this?

Iason didn't vocalize the words, but his eyes said enough.

Iason was there because Orphe had told him there was an issue regarding Riki. That Orphe would not divulge the contents over holochannel spoke volumes about the gravity of the situation as something Orphe did not want to make public. Iason didn't expect Aisha to be involved as well.

Could it involve Aisha's pet?

The feud between Aisha's pet and Riki was legendary; there was no love lost between them. Because of it, Iason who had no interest in pet politics could remember the name of Aisha's pet.

To Riki, it was a nuisance—but Riki's policy was to return any act of violence threefold. And so Aisha's proud Academy breed pet was humiliated in public. It was the biggest scandal of Eos and cemented Riki's reputation as the vicious, uncontrollable slumdog in the eyes of other pets.

No pet dared face Riki directly. Of course, there was a corresponding increase in whispering and innuendo. Riki's presence in contravention to the established norms of Eos could not be ignored. It violated everything the pets understood.

Pets were territorial; it was a matter of survival as old as evolution, even in the pleasure quarters of Eos. But until Iason brought Riki into the salon, the arguments were petty.

Riki was that unique presence which defied everything about Eos.

"Fear not, it is not trouble," Orphe said.

Then Iason had no concerns. Riki was demonstrating good manners and behaving himself.

"But it is an issue." With that, Orphe activated the holoscreen with a wave.

The image of a Paradita appeared. "Do you recall this one?" Orphe asked.

No question about it—at the Bacchanalia it was introduced at, it was a standout. Raoul raved so much about Paraditas into Iason's ear that he still remembered it two years later.

"What about this Paradita hybrid?" Iason asked.

"Apparently it is fascinated with your slumdog." There was no hostility in the words, but a sense of unease. Iason raised an eyebrow as the holoscreen displayed the garden. Riki and the Paradita, together. From the imagery, the contact appeared frequent. From the looks of it, it could have been a rendezvous, but Riki's eyes were blatant in their hostility and disgust.

Iason was content. Regardless of what Orphe thought, Riki wasn't interested in the Paradita.

"What is the issue here?"

From all appearances it looked as if the Paradita was bothering Riki. The issue was clearly with the Paradita.

And with that, Aisha's presence didn't make sense. The Paradita belonged to an Onyx—and had no relation to Aisha's pet.

"Did Riki strike the Paradita?" Iason asked.

"It would be simpler if he did." Orphe pressed his fingers together.

The truth of the matter was that Orphe could then contentedly crush Riki without a second thought. But Orphe had allowed Iason to bring Riki back into Eos—and become the center of scandal once again. For the likes of Gideon, it was a source of entertainment. But it was too late for Orphe to reverse what had been done.

"Then what?"

"There is an unexpected complication."

As if anticipating Iason's reply, Aisha interjected tersely, "The furniture lodged a protest."

Iason narrowed his eyes.

Orphe continued. "With furniture involved, the matter becomes contentious. We all know what trouble furniture involvement brings. Steen. Mimea. Daryl."

Iason couldn't care less about the furniture.

"So furniture is the issue?"

"Exactly."

That failed to explain the presence of Aisha. She might be overlord of Tanagura—but her rights over Eos were limited. For Orphe to consult her in matters of furniture didn't make sense. Neither did the reverse. Iason cut to the chase.

"Aisha, what is your concern in this?"

Aisha paused, then began: "Apparently the start of this was the furniture assigned to this Paradita breaking down."

"Apparently?"

"In other words, the furniture probably heard its Paradita was associating with your slumdog."

Aisha stated things with a certain lack of clarity that was to be expected. Furniture was protected by a vow of silence.

Once pet rings were installed at a Bacchanalia, pet registration for Eos was complete and the need for a pet collar ceased. Without holding a pet's leash for training or otherwise, furniture couldn't enter the salon. It made it harder for furniture to monitor the pet, but in the salon the risk for a pet to become involved in trouble was considered negligible.

But once Riki became a pet that all changed. More than pets, furniture feared Riki. Furniture was held responsible for the conduct of a pet.

There was a neural network dedicated to pet matters for access by furniture, which previously was devoid of information. Once Riki arrived the datastreams became endless. Pets returning to furniture were in tears over the presence of the slumdog in their midst. Furniture across Eos feared their pet could become tangled in some terrible incident with the slumdog.

Aisha's pet Steen went mad and cut Riki with a knife. And then Daryl hacked the Eos security grid and facilitated Riki's escape. Such incidents scared furniture no end. Once Riki was gone, the feeling was that everything would revert to what it had been. Once Riki returned as a fully mature male, panic set in.

Every furniture in Eos feared Riki would corrupt their pet or bring their pet into some incident from which the furniture would never recover.

"The Paradita furniture was stressed to the point where it could not function," Aisha stated flatly.

Iason glanced at Oiphe. who shrugged.

"This furniture belonging to its Onyx went to its floor leader and

eventually the discussion went to Tomass."

Tomass was Aisha's furniture. Iason finally saw where the thread lay.

"The furniture asked for help?"

When Steen went crazy, Tomass as his furniture was punished. Since the punishment was administered by the master, Iason didn't know what that was. But if Aisha's pet was liquidated and the furniture was still there, then the punishment was clear.

Pets thought furniture was assigned to a residence, to be changed out as the master wished. But masters thought differently. Pets could be replaced. The same for competent furniture wasn't the case.

"Tomass is the floor leader of Apex Level."

"Really now."

To be floor leader of Apex Level was to reign over all furniture in Eos. To discuss things with Tomass was to reach the ears of Aisha.

"That is why you are here?" Iason asked Aisha.

"Yes."

It was no cry for help between furniture. It was a deliberate attempt to influence Blondies to act on Riki. Iason couldn't help but sigh.

"What did your furniture Tomass warn you about?"

"How this can all be settled quietly."

"Did this not become a public matter the moment the furniture spoke of it?"

"If your slumdog was not involved, furniture would not have to resort to this method."

Orphe spoke. "Were you aware of this, Iason?"

"Somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"Surely, Orphe, you would not think I would bring this to your attention?" Iason furrowed his brow.

"The Paradita will not listen to his furniture. He will not heed warnings about your slumdog. He is obsessed." Aisha spoke in ominous tones.

"Obsessed?" Iason said.

"Likely there was a relationship before your pet returned."

"A relationship?" Iason's gaze hardened.

"Why not find out for yourself?" Orphe interjected. "This is my recommendation."

Iason cut him off. "To incarcerate my pet until the Paradita calms down?"

Orphe sighed. Iason went silent. The whole situation disgusted him.

The issue was a Paradita. From a pet perspective, Riki was a slumdog without even a breeding stock number.

But the Paradita was owned by an Onyx. Iason was a Blondy—there was rank to consider. In Eos, everything was based on rank. Not that Iason's position as a Blondy was ever in doubt.

"Iason, you do not attend breeding parties with your pet so you wouldn't know, but that Paradita is quite popular. Requests to breed with it are endless. Reservations extend out three months." Aisha's voice was terse. "In other words, it cannot be seen with your slumdog."

This was no understatement.

For pets, the goal was to breed with higher and higher quality pets for desirable traits. For a Paradita to be this popular was no doubt a

source of pride to its master. It said much about his discernment in owning such a pet. It was only natural the Onyx would want to protect his property.

Raoul said a Paradita hybrid was exceedingly rare. Iason was all too aware.

In Midas, the Academy breed was the most prestigious, but even with lower ranked breeds, mutation was highly prized. If it turned out to be a mutation which couldn't be duplicated, it would be worth even more than an Academy.

"Of course, if you put that slumdog out in a breeding party that changes everything," said Orphe without a trace of irony. Iason knew that regardless of Riki's reputation, his performance at the last Bacchanalia was legendary—and an endless source of fascination and interest for the other Blondies and their pets.

"Until when?" Iason said.

"Three weeks, perhaps." It was pointless to argue with Orphe.

"For what cause?" asked Iason. "My pet will not remain in detention without reason."

Orphe waved data across the holoscreen until it rested on a single image.

"How about violation of regulations?"

The image was that of Riki in the garden, sleeping in a tree branch. Two songbirds perched on his head.

Iason smiled. It was an image that could never be seen anywhere else.

"Your slumdog apparently reverted to its bestial nature," Orphe commented.

"No other pet could ever do this," Aisha concurred.

Orphe noted the concern in Iason's face.

"Your slumdog has behaved itself quite well. This is the best we can do."

Iason's residence boasted high ceilings. Open panorama windows afforded a view of distant Jupiter Tower.

At the usual time, Riki came out for breakfast prepared by Cal. Iason in rare form descended in nightclothes.

"Good morning, master," Cal said with deference. Iason nodded and sat down at the table in front of Riki.

"What?"

"You are under detention for three weeks."

Riki's hand stopped. "For what?" He glared. Cal visibly shook. The glare spoke louder than words.

"Cal," Iason said. Cal remained frozen in place.

"Yes, master. Today at 0700 hours, there was a notification from Eos security. Master Riki, for violation of Salon Code 17 Section 5, you are sentenced to detention for a period of three weeks duration."

"I didn't do anything!" Riki spat with anger. Not that Riki would ever confess if he did, but at least he would do it away from the eyes of the ever-present cameras in Eos. And Riki knew where all the deadzones in security were. During the first month of his return, he made a point to locate all of them. It was the only way he could pass the time while being made a spectacle of.

Riki's outrage was palpable. He would never do anything to risk being punished by Iason—at least, nothing for which he would be immediately found out.

"What the hell is Salon Code 17 Section 5?" Riki demanded.

Iason glanced at Cal to continue.

"Article 17 governs off limits areas. Section 5 governs property damage."

Riki was in disbelief; without any idea of what he did, the thought entered his head that he might have been confused with someone else—to be immediately discarded. No one would be confused with the slumdog in Eos.

Iason's voice was stern.

"Outside of designated paths, everything is off limits in the garden. Never mind sleeping in the branches of a rare tree."

Riki was speechless.

Iason continued, "I was told you'd reverted to your bestial nature."

"That..." Riki fell silent. That was to dodge Miguel. It was the only way to get away from him—but the tree was so comfortable Riki ended up falling asleep. Riki didn't see signs, but he paused to think.

The fences around the paths are red—maybe that means off limits?

Pets were illiterate so all signs were in colors. Riki having returned from the slums forgot this. It was carelessness on his part, but still—three weeks of detention. Not even a verbal warning?

Even if Riki assaulted a pet, it would be no more than three days banishment from the salon. In light of that this penalty was excessive and there was something behind it. *Maybe to keep me out of the salon?* Riki didn't know who could be behind it, but he knew he was so hated in Eos that it could have been anybody.

"Dammit, stop looking for petty shit to pin me with. Fucking Orphe."

Cal stood there in shock. Iason didn't bother to raise an eyebrow.

Chapter 5

Three weeks.

Detention served, Riki was in the salon again.

From the hab modules to the salon required a transfer to the grav elevator at the 30th Level.

To get to the garden, took passage through another elevator hall. The passageway was an escalator across three floors and every time Riki went through it he felt unease.

Who? When? Where? Why?

And then he remembered. *Archway. The voice of a child. Memory, memory, memory.*

The elevator hall resembled the one at the Museum of the Guardians.

The memory was buried deep in Riki's mind.

Now that he thought about it, perhaps there was nothing different between being under the Guardians and the salon. For those of Ceres, the time under the Guardians was sacred, just like Eos was paradise for pets. Even if that paradise stripped away all human dignity.

Riki couldn't get used to Eos because everything about it was a fraud.

In Ceres, at the age of thirteen a teenager was forced from the Guardians. For Eos there was actually a limit to the age for pets, but other than Riki it was generally set at seventeen. Under the Guardians as in Eos, youth was a commodity. Riki belonged to neither world.

Riki stared straight ahead.

Those not used to the sight of Riki whispered as he passed by. Not that he cared. He turned a corner to the sounds of a shouting match.

"You're a disrespectful Gilrea," cut the voice of a girl into Riki's ears. A cluster of pets was in front of the elevator that was Riki's destination.

"You're nothing but an Amida," replied the equally shrill voice of another female pet. "I'm ranked higher than you."

"Who decided that?"

"That's why you're so useless, you don't even understand."

The female pets continued to argue the superiority of their respective breeds. There were sides to this argument, each adding a voice to the cacophony. It was all about breeding, not beauty. That was status for pets. That and the standing of the master in Eos.

For elites there was an unwritten rule, to choose pets befitting one's station in life. The only one in Eos to totally disregard that and turn it on its head was Iason, for choosing a slumdog like Riki.

The Gilrea and Amida pets continued to bicker. Riki found it all pointless. Even for pets of the highest ranked Academy breed, there were differences in pedigree. Riki first heard this from Mimea. Even if they couldn't read or write, pets embraced breeding status above all else.

Status meant nothing to Riki who had fought for everything his whole life. Mimea never understood this about him; the difference between them was worlds apart.

The argument continued.

It was at question of who broke down first.

Riki briefly considered intervening, then the crowd parted and a single pet matched eyes with his. The pet froze with terror, whispering Riki's name. The entire crowd whipped around and recoiled.

It's him.

Riki.

The slumdog.

The shock rippled through the crowd. The argument stopped.

The pets looked on in silence as Miguel emerged from the crowd.

"Riki!"

Riki was speechless. He considered walking away. Miguel smiled and approached him.

I get three weeks detention and now this. I have no luck, Riki thought to himself.

"How are you?"

Unable to read the atmosphere around him, Miguel continued to smile. Riki glared. He wondered if Miguel was this clueless or if something else was at play.

Riki started walking fast toward the grav elevator. The crowd scattered to make way.

"You're going to the garden, right?" Miguel asked. Riki ignored him.

"While you were gone, Riki, blue flowers bloomed everywhere."

Riki turned on him.

"Stop following me."

Miguel froze in place.

"Go play with the other kids. Stop following me."

Miguel looked at Riki as if the impact of those words was physical, Riki stepped into the grav elevator and the portal closed behind him.

Nothing good will happen if you're with me.

Riki knew the truth of those words. He gritted his teeth as the grav elevator ascended.

Ten days later.

Riki was in his favorite spot in the garden with his dataslate, reading a translated version of the myths of Vila Napas in ancient Elant. Time passed fast this way for Riki.

Everything about the garden—the wind, sunlight, shade—was all artificial. But the soil, trees, flowers, birds and animals were still organic, even if constructed by the pinnacle of Tanagura technology, which brought extinct animals back to life. No one bothered Riki. There was no Miguel. Riki was content.

Shut up.

You're a fucking pain.

Stop following me.

Riki never changed his Words to Miguel, but apparently voicing them in public did the job. Riki's normal days were back. Everything had worked out; of that, Riki had no doubt.

And then Riki's peace was shattered from an unexpected direction.

The breathless face of a female pet appeared in front of him, sereaining.

"You stupid slumdog, you ruined everything, everything! I was waiting for weeks until you wrecked it all, you stupid slumdog, I hate you! I hate you!" The breathless pet screamed at Riki and ran off as quickly as she'd appeared, leaving Riki utterly confused.

And it happened the next day, with a different female pet.

And the day after that with yet another.

Riki wondered if this was some sort of new pet game, some sort of dare. He paused to think.

At first, he was speechless.

Then he was annoyed.

Finally, he was furious.

Even though Riki knew better than to retaliate and make things worse, the reason for why this was happening eluded him. And apparently the only one who didn't understand was Riki, as if there was some sort of secret everyone was in on.

Riki thought about asking Cal but thought better of it. Once he did that, Iason would know—and Riki wanted to avoid that at all costs.

As usual, Riki left Iason's residence on the Apex Level and got off the gray elevator on the 30th Level. Walking into the salon, a sense of unease struck him. He looked for the cause and found it; there was someone in the elevator hall who was obviously not a pet.

It was furniture—with different livery than that worn by Cal. It was clear the furniture did not belong to a Blondy, and there was no leashed pet in sight. The furniture stood there alone. Riki wondered who he was.

Riki stopped and stared because the furniture was pale, shaking on his feet with clenched fists. Their eyes met. The furniture's eyes widened. His fists trembled.

"You." The voice came out as an accusation.

"It's all your fault. Why you? Why are you special? Why? Why?"

Riki was used to abuse. Being screamed at for nothing at all didn't faze him. But for a furniture to come out and say this rather than a pet was new. *Why?* Riki was astonished. *Who the fuck is he?* Riki never had conversations with furniture, even those of Blondies.

The only ones he knew were Aisha's Tomass and Raoul's Ray. Steen and Mimea made that possible. Everyone else was a stranger. But

even if Riki did not know them, the reverse wasn't true. The duty of furniture was to take care of pets. Their neural network was filled with nothing but chatter on the blacklisted slumdog.

This is bad.

Pets were immature and impulsive but this was different—the furniture was about to explode. Riki knew the signs. He had the scars from the slums to prove it—or did, before Iason had them surgically removed.

Saying anything was pointless. It would only accelerate the confrontation. Whether it was with a pet or furniture Riki wanted to avoid that at all costs. Riki kept himself out of trouble; he didn't know what he could have done to set this furniture off.

The furniture was trouble, but not in a physical sense. Riki was experienced with fighting in the slums; this furniture had never set foot outside of Eos. No, the trouble would come from creating a disturbance. From Iason.

"This is all your fault! But it never shows on your face, like it never bothers you. Why? It's not fair!"

Riki had the inescapable feeling he'd been here before, as if he'd lived through this once already.

This can't be.

Steen coming at him with a knife.

If I lose everything, you should lose everything too.

The words pulled at Riki's mind.

I lost Cher, it's not fair, if I lose something you should too.

Lavi.

When he was under the Guardians.

That's not it.

It's not Lavi. Riki remembered Lavi but this furniture wasn't him. Everything shifted into focus. The realization dawned on him.

"Are you Vince?"

The name emerged from distant memory.

The face of the furniture darkened into something terrible.

Apex Level.

Aisha's furniture Tomass was making the bed of his pet.

Without a wrinkle, spreading the sheet out perfectly. Routine. Tomass's ID armlet pulsed once. A holophone call.

What could it be? From who?

The caller ID was not security but Platinum.

All furniture had access to a neural network and an armlet—so they could be reached anytime, but emergency calls were rare. This was unheard of.

Oskar?

Tomass flipped the holophone on.

But before Tomass could say a word, Oskar screamed.

"Hurry, bring a medkit—elevator hall 30th Level!"

The line cut. Tomass stood stunned for a moment.

Why? What?

Tomass took the medkit and started running.

30th Level. Elevator Hall.

Tomass arrived and found Oskar standing there pale.

"What happened? Someone hurt?"

Oskar took Tomass by the arm wordlessly to the other end of the hall in the deadzone of a security camera.

Tomass started to ask questions, then stopped.

Riki was slumped against the wall, bleeding from his left arm. At his feet was a furniture collapsed in a pool of blood. A leashed female pet nearby was cowering in fear and weeping softly.

"Master Riki!"

Tomass saw the out on Riki's arm was serious.

A pink ribbon served as a tourniquet, out of place. Likely it came from the female pet. Oskar's hand was free of blood, so no doubt Riki applied it himself. On the floor was a las-knife.

No.

Tomass opened the medkit and sprayed Riki's arm with a coagulant.

"Oskar, call security!" Tomass shouted.

"Don't," Riki said flatly.

Oskar looked at Tomass and then Riki, and swallowed.

"Don't call security."

"What are you saying?"

Being found out was not the issue. For this to remain a secret was impossible. Riki knew this. How it started wasn't the issue. The furniture was at fault. And Riki knew that was what Tomass wanted to avoid.

"Don't call security. I'll go to medical myself. Help me up."

Riki meant every word. Tomass was speechless. What was Riki

thinking?

"Help me up."

Riki's right hand gripped Tomass's arm and attempted to rise.

"No, if you go without reporting this, the furniture will still be blamed," Tomass said tersely.

"Really?"

Riki's eyes were silent.

"Of course," replied Tomass. The blood loss was substantial. *Maybe he isn't thinking straight*, Tomass grit his teeth.

If Master Iason finds out... Tomass shuddered.

"Why can't you handle this quietly?" Riki asked.

"I can't do that!"

"No security," Riki repeated.

"Oskar! Call security now!" Tomass screamed.

Oskar finally tapped his armlet to issue an alert.

Dammit Oskar, why are you so useless?



Tomass was frustrated no end. There were procedures in place for

this.

"Don't blame him. He was listening to my instructions," Riki said weakly.

Furniture were conditioned to obey masters and pets alike. No pet would ever try to protect furniture. The exception was Riki. Tomass didn't understand why.

"Why no security?" Tomass asked. Maybe this would be his only chance to talk to Riki. Maybe Riki would answer. Or maybe not.

"I had instructions not to cause trouble. Doesn't matter who started it. The punishment was banishment from the salon."

"These instructions came from Master Iason?"

Riki nodded.

Tomass was speechless. For Riki to go to such lengths, the three weeks must have taken a toll on him.

"Do you know who this is?" Riki pointed to the unconscious furniture with his jaw.

"This is the livery of an Onyx furniture," Tomass answered.

"Probably did two or three of his ribs in," Riki said nonchalantly. Riki was no stranger to violence.

This is a nightmare. The thought crossed Tomass's mind. The consequences would be felt by all furniture across Eos. It was Oskar's bad luck to come upon the scene while leading a new pet by the leash.

Who is this?

Tomass mouthed the question. Oskar shook his head side to side.

Black livery. A furniture—who fights Riki of all the... That thought made Tomass think of a possibility.

Oh no.

Tomass broke out in a cold sweat. He moved to the other side of the unconscious furniture and took a look at the face. Suspicion became fact.

"Simon."

Oskar heard the name. "It's Simon?" he asked.

"Simon? This guy?" Riki's eyes narrowed.

A silence descended on everyone.

"This is Simon? The furniture belonging to Miguel the Paradita?"

Tomass was stunned to hear this from Riki. Pets as a rule did not know who furniture assignments were to. Many pets didn't even know the name of their own furniture.

"Do you know Simon?" Tomass asked.

"No, but Miguel said his furniture's name was Simon." And then Riki went quiet.

Tomass knew Miguel was obsessed with Riki, but didn't know they'd talked until now.

Riki's face demanded answers. "If you become furniture in Eos, are you assigned a new name?"

The question startled Tomass.

"If you are chosen to become furniture, does that happen?"

What is Riki saying? Tomass's pulse quickened.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tomass's lips shook.

"This is Simon, you're Tomass, that's Oskar. I'm asking if these are just furniture names."

Riki's gaze did not waver. The intensity of it was staggering. Those

eyes locked onto the unconscious figure.

"This isn't Simon."

The words came out low and certain.

"The name I knew him as is Vince. Not Simon. Vince. During our Guardian days he was one year younger than me in the same block."

Tomass found no words for an answer.

Chapter 6

"What a situation." Orphe furrowed his brows.

"How could it end like this?" said Raoul with irony.

"Your pet is such a troublemaker, Iason," Aisha said in her mechanical voice.

"What kind of situation is this?"

"This isn't trouble, but catastrophe."

"Doesn't your pet have any sense of responsibility?"

Iason was no stranger to criticism over Riki, but this time it was different. The situation might change, but the source of the trouble remained the same.

Riki's return to Eos created a great deal of heated discussion between Blondies, and the final decision had been made by Orphe.

"Maybe it will bring refreshing change into this place."

That was what Iason had said about bringing a slumdog into Eos, but the cost was far beyond expected.

"Riki is the aggrieved in this case," Iason stated emphatically, but the other three didn't budge an inch.

The wound on his arm was so deep that after three days, Riki was still in medical.

Denied access to Riki because of the treatment, Iason was bitter. *Or perhaps the treatment is just an excuse and the truth of it is interrogation.*

"The furniture in question suffered blunt trauma, internal bleeding, a broken collarbone and cracked ribs. My pet nearly died from exsanguination. Clearly it was self-defense."

After all, the furniture had a las-knife out in public. The intent to kill was obvious. No one could blame Riki for what he did.

Riki undoubtedly reformed after his return to Eos. Otherwise, the Paradita incident would have become a much bigger scandal much faster. Riki hadn't initiated trouble his entire time in Eos, either before or after his escape. He was just responding to provocation as a slumdog would.

"Your pet says as much," Orphe nodded.

"Then what is the issue?"

"We're asking for the truth of the matter but he won't say a word."

Iason narrowed his eyes.

"Is that why you still hold Riki?"

"Yes," said Orphe.

Word of the incident was all over Eos. Before security arrived a number of salon pets laid eyes on the scene. An Onyx furniture laid out by a Blondy pet—and none other than the slumdog himself.

"Forgive me, master!"

Iason recalled Cal trembling in fear. A pet's actions reflected badly on the master, but the failings of furniture even more so. Iason's reputation should be in shreds after two scandalous incidents involving Riki—but such was the prestige of Iason that this was far from the case. For the Onyx who owned Miguel, it was another matter entirely. All chances for social advancement were gone thanks to his furniture.

"Ask the furniture why he attacked Riki."

"There is an issue with that," Orphe replied.

Iason's eyes narrowed further. "An issue with what?"

Raoul answered. "There is no brain damage but the mind is

shattered. The furniture is catatonic."

And then Iason understood why Raoul was present.

Raoul continued. "The furniture is conscious but there is no id or higher order brain functions. For all intents and purposes the furniture is not even aware it is alive."

"You mean a vegetative state?"

"Yes," replied Raoul.

"The reason for it?"

"I haven't a clue, I looked for root causes but the furniture is mindwiped."

"You mean to tell me the brain reset itself?"

"No. The synapses died entirely."

Which meant the furniture would be liquidated for harvest.

"The furniture may be dead but the security footage remains."

Orphe spoke. "There's another issue. Somehow, the system went down."

"You mean not the Eos security net but just the cameras?"

Orphe nodded. "The shutdown was only for thirty minutes but that covered the entire incident. No footage exists. That is why response to the incident was delayed."

Listening to Orphe, it seemed like someone *deliberately* set this up. It would be inconceivable in Eos had not Daryl hacked the security mainframe before to let Riki escape.

Orphe went on, "In other words, we have nothing with which to prove your pet's guilt or innocence."

Iason fell silent.

A violent outburst by furniture.

Riki's silence.

A mysterious crash of security systems.

It occurred to Iason that this might be a plan to have Riki terminated, but Orphe wouldn't bother with such underhanded methods. Then who? And for what?

"What did the Platinum furniture say?" Iason asked.

"That they found the fight had ended with the furniture on the floor," said Aisha.

Orphe continued, "The furniture in question has choke marks on the neck, but Aisha's furniture says he saw nothing of the sort. Likely the confusion of the moment got to him."

The female pet witnessing the event would probably undergo a limited mindwipe.

"Why not ask the Paradita?" Iason asked.

Raoul's eyes flashed a rebuke.

Orphe sighed.

Aisha remained silent.

Iason didn't intend for his words to have such effect, but the thought crossed his mind that placing Riki in detention had been pointless after all.

"The Paradita is recovering from illness," Orphe replied.

Then all breeding appointments of course would be canceled.

"How unexpected," Iason said flatly.

"I have a suggestion," Orphe said.

"If you want to chemically interrogate my pet, the answer is no.

Placing him in the hands of Raoul for neural hacking is out of the question," Iason stated in no uncertain terms.

Orphe let out a deep sigh.

"Why not let me handle it?"

"Because he doesn't want to be implicated along with his pet," said Aisha cynically.

"How crude of you, Aisha," Iason laughed. "Implicated in what?"

"Everyone knows you are obsessed with your slumdog. Regardless of how bad your taste in pets has become, things are different now."

Iason's face clouded. What Aisha was saying didn't make sense. Apparently Orphe and Raoul were content to let Aisha have her say. Which meant Iason was the only one unaware of the thrust of Aisha's intent.

"Tomass says your pet did not know the furniture who attacked him belonged to the Paradita," Aisha said.

Of course. Riki had no interest in pet politics, let alone furniture names or assignments.

"But he knew who the furniture was," said Aisha mysteriously. "His name was Vince—as a Guardian ward, that is."

"So that is what it comes down to." Iason paused, and finally understood why Riki was still being held.

Irrespective of how the incident came to play out, Riki had realized all furniture in Eos was selected from the wards of Guardians. That was the crux of the problem, and Aisha knew it. If word got out within Eos or outside, the scandal would dwarf all others and the damage would be limitless.

"So Riki knows he and furniture share the same origins. That's what you wish to keep secret?"

"We want to know what your pet knows. The furniture's brain is

useless and Riki is our only lead. We want him to divulge everything he knows and mindwipe him."

It became clear to Iason why Raoul was present. If Iason wasn't here to refuse them, no doubt Aisha and Orphe would proceed as planned.

"You thought you could secure my cooperation this easily?" Iason asked.

"We know your obsession knows no limits."

"So you didn't want to displease me without consulting me first, is that it?" Iason was furious.

Orphe spoke. "Your slumdog has no imprinting or hypnotic controls. It's a rabid animal. It wouldn't be a problem to implant a new identity, but your slumdog is resilient. Isn't that right, Raoul?"

As if being reminded of Kirie, Raoul was silent.

"If you implant memories, there will be flaws in the procedure. You couldn't afford that," Iason stated.

"Then what?"

"Let me talk to him. I know how to get the truth out of my pet. There will be no complications."

Pet rights lay with the master. Regardless of the will of either Orphe or Aisha, those rights were enshrined within Eos. And to overturn those rights took a procedure for which there was no time.

Aisha stared at Orphe. Orphe sighed.

"It is nothing to make him talk to me," Iason said in measured tones.

"We understand."

With that, Iason rose to leave.

Aisha stopped him. "Iason."

"What?"

"I want you to remember something." Aisha paused. "My pet Tomass is scarred by this as well. Find an answer suitable not just for Blondies but for furniture."

Ordinarily Aisha would never say such a thing, but Iason understood what was behind it. Unease in the ranks of furniture meant order in Eos would cease to exist. And this was to be avoided at all costs.

"I will do what it takes."

With that Iason took his leave.

Medical room with pastel colors.

Sleep. Wake. Meals thrice a day.

With nothing else to do, Riki had time all day. The medical room was just for treatment, not relaxation. There was nothing to relieve the boredom.

When Iason stepped into the room, Riki recoiled.

"Such a tragedy."

Bracing for harsher words, Riki was surprised.

"Does it hurt?"

"It's settled down," Riki replied.

"That wound will seal in two more days. Without any trace of scar."

Riki didn't care if he picked up more scars, but that was life in the slums, not Eos, where Tanagura medicine was perfected by science.

There is no place for any god amongst us.

Raoul spoke those words. Considered throughout the worlds as both

a madman and a biochemist without peer. Under science, even incurable conditions could be treated in Tanagura; most diseases had been made extinct. All of humanity received the benefits in some way, but the chasm between religion and science only deepened.

Pets were made beautiful in Eos and whole, without wounds or scars. The only concession to blemish they carried on their skin were love bites. Riki never lacked for them. They replaced his hard-earned scars in the slums, wiped smooth by nanites. The memory of each scar, every confrontation was extinguished from Riki, as if Eos sought to deny Riki his origins.

"When do I go home?"

"When you speak the truth of what happened."

Riki remained silent. "Let's go then." He started to rise from the bed. Iason grasped an arm firmly.

"What?"

"The furniture you fought was one of your Guardian blockmates."

Riki froze.

"Vince, was it?"

"Simon. His name was Simon." The denial came fast to Riki.

"What happened in the elevator hall?"

"I already told them." Riki glared at Iason.

"Not me." Iason stood firm.

"Just watch the security footage."

Riki knew he was blacklisted and every movement he made in Eos was watched by someone, somewhere. He found this out once again being under detention for three weeks.

It was obvious what had happened in the elevator hall. Vince came at him with a las-knife, and Riki fought back. To bring the crazed Vince into the deadzone of security cameras took effort, but it was well done considering the circumstances, Riki thought. That the furniture would be punished was already beyond doubt—but Riki wanted to keep the incident quiet if at all possible. That Riki would suffer a near-lethal wound was unexpected. Riki hadn't expected the furniture to turn crazy once he called him Vince, nor did he expect him to draw a las-knife.

If only the security cams all went down. Riki thought if only no proof was there, he could still do something to hush it up and perhaps keep Iason from knowing—but it was too late now.

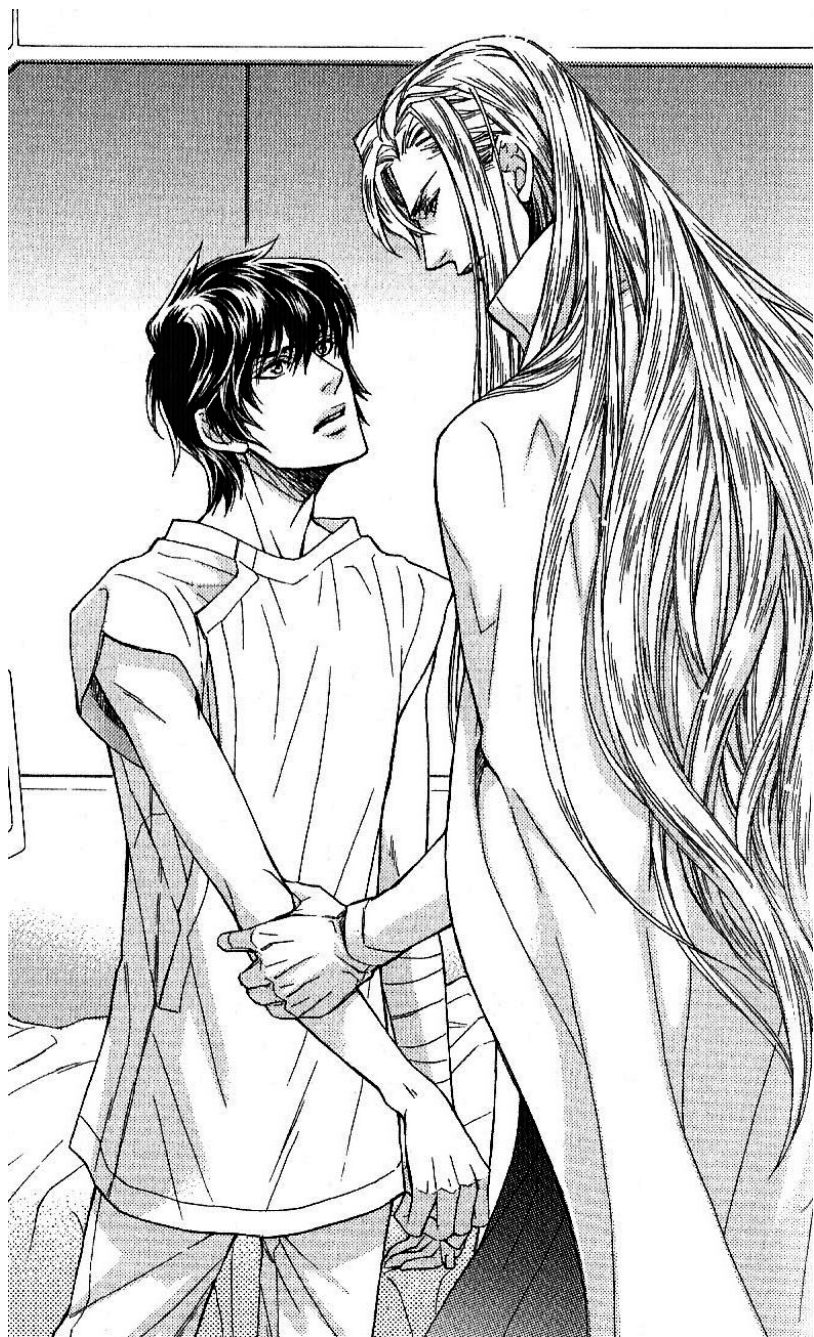
"There are questions to be answered."

"What questions?"

"Why the furniture of the Paradita attacked you. Its motive."

"I don't know. Fucking ask Simon."

"The furniture will be interrogated as a matter of procedure. What I am interested in is your perspective, so it can be matched against the security footage."



"What about Simon?"

"He is well. He survived the incident with no ill effects. He is undergoing interrogation as we speak."

Riki stared long and hard at Iason. Not that it would change anything.

"You understand lying to me is unacceptable, do you not, Riki?"

Riki knew. That lesson was branded into his very being.

"Or you'll use the pet ring on me, right?"

Iason's silence was reply enough.

"Speak of what happened," Iason commanded.

Riki sighed. "I don't know."

Because nothing Vince said made sense. None of it.

"If this was the slums instead of Eos I'd write him off as high or on a bad trip, one or the other. That's how crazy he sounded."

Crazy enough to bring a las-knife.

"I don't know what he was talking about. I just put him down as fast as I could once he pulled the las-knife on me."

During their time under the Guardians, Riki did nothing to earn Vince's enmity.

But if Tomass said Vice is Simon...

If Vince/Simon was Miguel's furniture it became more clear.

"I've had a lot of time to think and this is what I've come up with."

"Which is what?"

"He was afraid of his world crashing down on him."

Chosen against his will, chemically sterilized, name taken away from him—made into living furniture. That was the price Vince

paid to become Simon the furniture, to be reborn into a life of luxury and servitude. To Vince, Riki was no doubt a monster who threatened everything he worked to achieve in Eos through Miguel.

"There was a kid five years younger than me under the Guardians." Riki let out a long sigh. "He took after me like he worshipped the ground I walked on the whole time I knew him."

Back then all Riki cared about was Guy—Guy was everything to him. Nothing else mattered. When the Block Mother told Riki to look after Yunka he did—only because he was ordered to. Riki did not have a choice.

Yunka followed Riki everywhere. As a Big Brother, Riki didn't have to share his private life in its entirety with Yunka; but Yunka didn't understand. Or maybe he just didn't care.

"It was always Riki this, Riki that. He followed me around constantly." *Just like Miguel.*

"Like the Paradita?" Iason asked.

Yunka and Miguel were totally different to Riki; the only similarity between them was admiration for Riki. That alone was enough to trouble Vince.

"Vince saw me close up like that. Maybe he saw Yunka as Miguel, Miguel as Yunka. Because Yunka was with me, he was in trouble with others and ostracized by the rest of the block... And Yunka changed."

And then what happened long ago. Riki closed his eyes and pondered the Yunka he knew and what he became.

"Vince was probably afraid of what would happen with other pets if Miguel stuck by me. I'm a troublemaker wherever I go, remember? Failure of the pet is failure of furniture, right?"

As furniture, Vince feared that above all else. To share the fate of Steen and Mimea.

"But Vince going crazy..." Riki shook his head. "He was all Simon. I

didn't recognize Vince in those eyes."

To become Simon was all that Vince had. Their new identity was all furniture had. It was probably true for Katze as well. For Simon, being called Vince was a denial of his very existence in Eos.

"Once I called him Vince, he went crazy." Riki paused. "Hey."

"What is it?"

"This." Riki pointed to the bandage on his left arm. "If there's no scar, then did none of this ever happen?"

"That is not so," Iason said with finality.

"Then what? Eos furniture are all slumdogs taken from the Guardians. Vince, Tomass, Oskar, and I now know this. What now?"

Iason's pet being a slumdog was known to all. That in itself was not a problem. But not all furniture knew they shared the same origins one and all. None of them would admit to their own. They saw the hatred directed against Riki. This secret of their origins was only known to Blondies. Were it to become public knowledge, all furniture across Eos would be reviled and the carefully constructed artifice of its pleasure quarters would collapse.

"And I thought I was the only one." Riki regretted what happened keenly. "Will Tomass and Oskar be punished?"

"That is not for me to decide," Iason replied coldly.

"Orphe?"

"Yes."

"Then tell Orphe that I dragged them into it. That it's not their fault."

"Is it because they are slumdogs like yourself?"

"No."

That much was true for Riki. He knew Eos furniture came from the Guardians through Katze. That's why Riki could remain calm even now. The ultimate fate of Tomass and Oskar didn't matter to him.

Riki was Iason's pet and they were furniture.

Nothing ever changed.

Iason stared hard at Riki.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Riki sighed.

Iason's eyes searched for weakness.

"To be the slumdog of Eos—that was your source of pride. If the furniture ever shared even a fraction of your defiance, Eos would become unmanageable."

Riki paused.

"Then release me from Eos. Orphe will sort the rest of it out. I prefer living in the underworld, like Katze. Set me free."

Riki spat the words in defiance. It was all he had left.

Simon missing. Fifth day.

Miguel's routine did not change. He had new furniture already.

Simon did something terrible and was taken in by security; the Onyx was furious.

The Onyx said bad things about Simon. How he shamed him and was a disgrace. The Onyx was afraid of Iason taking revenge. Maybe all the Blondies would.

Miguel looked perturbed.

I didn't think Simon would be so useless. I thought he'd take care of Riki, after what Riki did to humiliate me in public. Oh well. Miguel sighed.

After the fifth day, Miguel became bored. Feigning illness had its limits.

At first, the thought of Riki made him physically sick. Miguel lost the will to eat. But this soon passed, and he was tired of being trapped in the residence of the Onyx and playing hologames all day.

Before all this happened, invitations to breed were common, so Miguel never felt sexual frustration. If he ever did at home, Simon was there to service him with his mouth in secret.

Not that it felt good. It never did.

Far better to turn a female pet inside out. Much more satisfying.

Once the master returns I should ask to be submitted to breed again, Miguel thought.

He absently thrust a fork into his dessert.

Chapter 7

Nier Darts. 2150 hours.

The cold night enveloped the world.

Kings Road had no shadows. The narrow alleyways were dead quiet. Even the stench of the slums submitted to the chill of the evening.

Between Area 9 "Ceres" and Area 7 "Dito" was a maze of illegally constructed buildings. Perverts, freaks, psychos. Offworld refugees called "sinkers." Freaks. Criminals.

These types crawled here day and night.

Everything could be had in Nier Darts for the right price. Morals were optional.

Citizens of Midas despised the slums known as Ceres, but even Ceres residents hated this part of the slums—ironic, since Area 9 wasn't even marked on official maps.

Not one dim light marked the way in Nier Darts; moonlight for two nights in a row was a luxury.

Guy stopped in his tracks.

"You scared, Luke?"

Behind him Luke snorted, incensed at the suggestion.

"How about you, Guy?"

Guy turned around. "Even by Ceres standards, Nier Darts is fucked up. Psychopathic hackers, failed cyborg experiments, crazed junkies—this place has it all."

Not that Guy thought every rumor about Nier Darts was true, but where there was smoke, there was usually fire.

"Like people come here for tourism and they just vanish, right?"
Luke replied caustically.

"This isn't like Bull Chip, Luke."

"How can you be scared shitless of Nier Darts and take on the big bad underworld? Fucking come on, Guy."

Flashback.

Just once, Riki called him "Katze." Lavi mentioned Scarface was a databroker.

"Well, this is unexpected," Lavi deadpanned.

No fucking shit. Scarface had a stare like orbital lasers. Those eyes sucked Guy right in. This guy was fucking way too good-looking.

How? What? Why? Who the fuck is he?

Slumdog and databroker. Guy couldn't see the connection between them.

"Maybe the courier job Riki had was for the underworld."

Lavi pointed this out and Guy startled.

Zac brought in courier work but this wasn't like that. It was big, big, big and it scared the fucking hell out of Guy.

Riki brought in a bottle of Vartan once. The ultra-rare liquor was impossible to acquire in Ceres. Guy stared at it and asked Riki:

"Did you go in on some deep shit or what?"

Riki had brushed it off with a laugh.

"Guy, I'm leaving the slums."

The ambition was palpable. Unquestionable.

"Riki does big things," Lavi had said without a trace of irony. "That pride of his keeps on taking hits and keeps on standing."

Guy didn't question Riki further then. There wasn't any need to dig further. It would all clear up. There'd been an absence of three years. Everything would take time.

I should have pushed harder, Guy thought. He was just relieved Riki was back from wherever he'd been. Even if things weren't the same anymore, even if Riki wasn't physically intimate—it didn't matter to Guy. He put a brave face on it. For Riki.

For nothing. Riki was gone.

Maybe if I was more honest with him, with myself, I wouldn't have lost him again.

Guy felt the regret deeply.

Nier Darts. The darkness.

"Luke, do you understand?"

"What?"

"Kirie was scared out of his mind. Starving, fucking crazy, and he ran to Riki of all people for help. It drove that conceited shitbird Kirie nuts—and Kirie is too stupid to understand fear because he's too busy looking at his next score. We are dealing with something big here."

"Who fucking cares, Guy. This is better than being jacked on stout."

Between the cold and Luke's indifference, Guy sighed.

"Guy."

"Yeah."

"We've come this far. Sid and Norris have put their chips in. We're

all committed," Luke whispered in a low tone. "The Guardians are involved. This concerns everyone. What Kirie saw—we have a right to know what he saw, right?"

"Yeah."

They'd come too far to turn back now.

"According to Django, Zico is a top flight hacker, right?"

If Lavi's information was correct, no datalock was secure from Zico—not even in Eos. Any information could be had for a price. The hard part was getting hold of him.

Lavi had told them Zico was in Nier Darts and left it at that.

If you're going to set this up, at least do it right, Guy thought, but hackers and databrokers evidently swam in different circles—so for a large additional fee, a meeting was arranged with one of Zico's contacts.

"That fucker better not have scammed us," Luke whispered.

Even Lavi was obviously not keen on getting too deep into Nier Darts.

"Let's roll."

With that, Guy started walking into the unknown.

Zico's contact had provided both of them with a set of night-vision shades and a map-enabled dataslate. Its soft light positioned a holographic arrow in the direction of travel.

Without it, there would have been no way to navigate the giant maze of Nier Darts. It was impossible in daylight, but even more so in darkness.

Luke walked alongside Guy, wordlessly. Guy reflected on Riki.

You have to pay a price to get ahead, Guy.

Forget it—if Katze is involved, it's over.

Forget Kirie, Guy. Just forget him.

Three months since Riki vanished.

Three months.

For Guy, whose last memory of Riki was a bitter, pointless argument—each day was filled with regret.

Regret. Pain. Desperation.

Guy couldn't forget even if he wanted to. Even if everything Guy knew changed, there was no turning back now.

Something—something terrible drove Kirie crazy. The truth of it would lead to Riki.

The holographic arrow faded into an icon marked *Stop*.

Guy and Luke stared quietly at each other. Minutes passed. The tension was unbearable.

From beneath their feet, there was a slight vibration which startled them.

With a *boom* the ground gave way to freefall. It was all they could do to remain standing.

The ground came to an abrupt halt and slowly descended. The sound of servos hummed in the background. Guy and Luke removed their goggles as they realized they were standing on a lift.

"Nice surprise," Luke said with narrow eyes, voice shaking slightly.

Breathing easier, Guy licked his lips unconsciously. The lift eventually stopped. Before them was a dimly lit passageway. Wordlessly they traversed it. At the end was a lighted door.

"A manual door? In this day and age?"

Looking at the door, Luke remarked caustically, "Don't tell me it's electrified."

"Only one way to find out."

Slowly, Guy took the doorknob in hand and twisted it. A click sounded. He pushed on the door. It gave way.

On the other side was an entirely different world.

It was covered from wall to wall in ornate rugs. In the center of the room, an exquisite low table and divans were placed. Holographic art of scenes from Vila Napas adorned the walls.

How much money did this cost?

Slumdogs had no experience of the luxuries of Midas, but to Guy and Luke it was as if they'd stepped into a luxury suite. They stood in shock. The contrast with the filth above ground was enormous.

What rendered them even more speechless was the presence of an exquisite youth with shoulder-length violet hair and eyes to match on one of the divans.

"I am Zico."

Seriously? Both Guy and Luke stared at each other.

The thought crossed their minds that this was an elaborate setup. Maybe the boy was a decoy and the real Zico was elsewhere watching their discomfort with amusement. This boy looked nothing like the top flight hacker Zico.

Perhaps entirely familiar with the looks on their faces, Zico laughed.

"All I have is this face, unfortunately."

Guy started to stammer an apology.

Zico waved it aside. "I assure you, I am not a decoy. Please suspend your disbelief and have a seat."

Zico was all business.

"Your contact never said you were a kid," Luke blurted impulsively.

Guy threw a sharp elbow into Luke's side.

Zico entertained the faint trace of a smile on his lips.

"No representative of mine would be that talkative. They are instructed to speak the bare minimum required for business and nothing more. This is necessary to survive in a place like Nier Darts. Surely you understand."

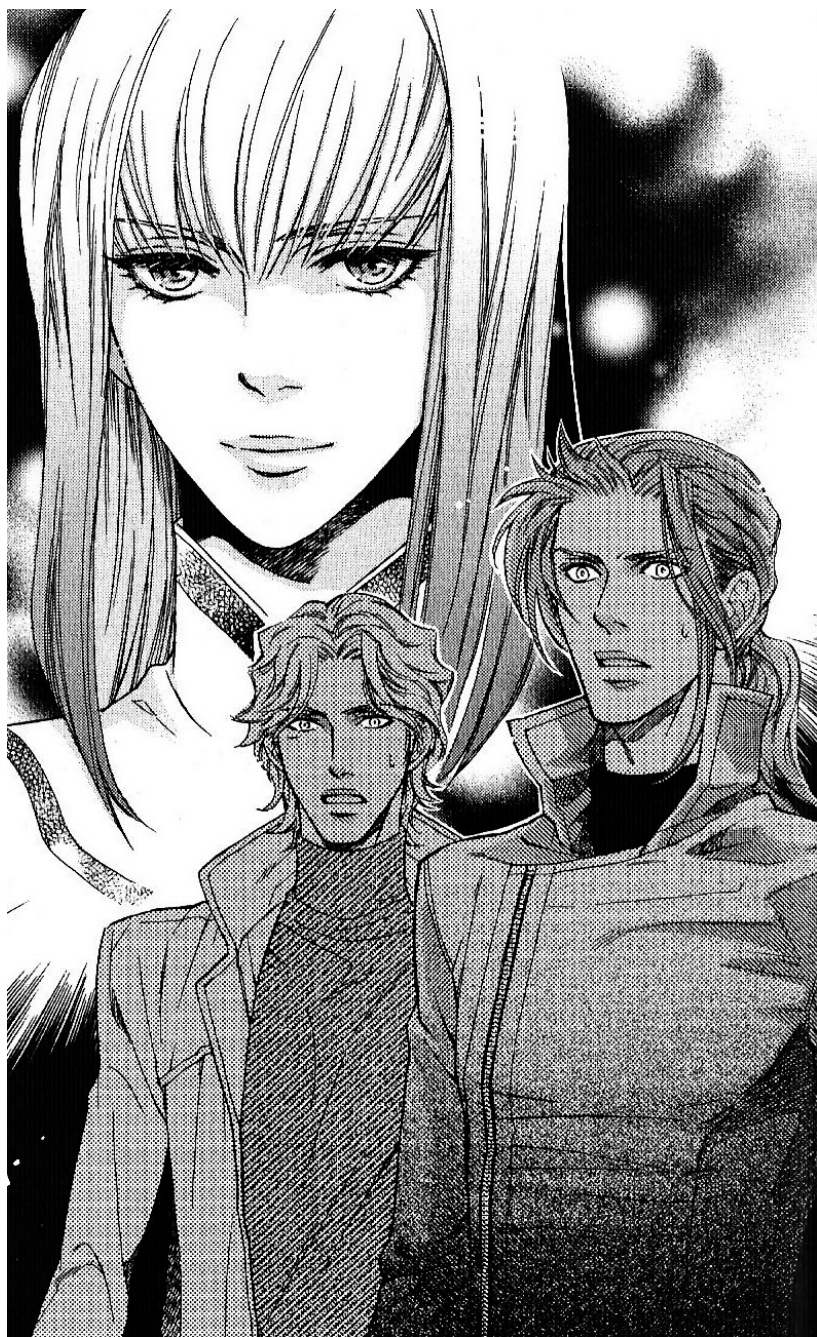
The voice was soft, but the eyes had a hard glint out of place in the delicate features of his face.

Zico was no kid. Underestimating him was dangerous. In Nier Darts, nothing was as it seemed.

"Please sit down. I insist. It's so hard to conduct business if you two stand at such a distance." Zico gestured to a divan across from his. "Now, what kind of information are you looking for?"

Guy spoke. "Before we get into that, I want to ask if there is any chance our request will get out."

"There is no need for concern. I deal in trust. The privacy of my clients is of the highest concern."



Guy nodded. "Can you look anything up? Even something

dangerous and life-threatening?"

He was prepared for the truth, no matter what it took. But it was clear he was out of his depth in negotiating with Zico.

"That depends on the information and the price. This is business, but my safety is important to me as well," Zico stated in matter-of-fact tones.

"But I heard you'd take any case on?" Guy insisted.

"Rumors are unreliable. People say what other people want to hear. Maybe 30 percent of it is truth. the rest fiction." Zico pursed his lips. "Of course, due to such rumors I never lack for clients."

That Zico would consent to an audience with a pair of slumdogs was already a sign of his interest. It crossed Guy's mind that maybe Zico already knew.

"We want to know what the connection is between the underworld and the Guardians."

Zico's eyes sharpened.

"Is there a particular rumor you wish to trace?"

"We want to know everything about a databroker named Katze. We want to know where he came from."

"Ah. Scarface," Zico said quietly.

"You know him?"

"In a matter of speaking, yes," Zico replied.

In other words, Katze was a major player in the underworld.

And Riki was involved with Katze. What went on between them?

Guy and Luke had come here to find out the connection between the underworld and the Guardians—and to learn what drove Kirie crazy, but beyond that they were at a loss.

"If this involves Katze, there will be an additional fee." Zico inclined his head. Slumdogs or not, this was business.

"There are no rules or fixed rates for this kind of work, we understand." Luke reached for the words, "But you're not going to take our money and resell the information to someone else, are you?"

"Like I said before, I deal in trust. Of course Ceresian digital cash is valueless to me, so if you can't pay in Midas rates then we have nothing further to discuss."

Ceres and Midas had entirely separate economies and currency systems. Hard currency had no value in either; all transactions were conducted digitally.

Zico was curious whether they could pay or not. Guy spoke up. "We can pay. Will you take the contract?"

"Understood."

"Please be quick about it."

"Of course."

To Zico, it was all business.

When Guy and Luke departed, Zico sat down at the bar on the wall and poured a glass of wine for himself. Not to celebrate new business, but to clear his head. Zico took one sip, put the glass down and walked purposefully to the security door on the far end of the room.

Biometric sensors and locks gave way for Zico to enter into a scaled chamber, shielded from electromagnetic interference. This was where Zico worked.

The entirety of the room was stacked with a partially sentient AI with an organic circuitry interface that responded only to Zico's brainwaves. This was what made Zico a top-flight hacker. With a blow of a kiss to the mainframe, Zico seated himself in his cockpit chair.

He activated his connection to the neural network and turned on a secure holochannel. And then waited.

The call went through.

"Are you busy?"

Zico's voice was both pleasure and business.

Chapter 8

Midas. The underworld. Area 2 "Flare."

The darkness was illuminated by the flashing light of storefronts in streets that never slept.

From the outside, what appeared to be a dilapidated pharmacy on the street level held a secret passageway to Katze's hideout.

"I will contact you myself."

Katze cut the holochannel.

Worry clouded Katze's countenance. Katze never showed visible emotion. When the holophone pulsed, it was already close to midnight.

"Report."

The Blondy on the holochannel had no concern for Katze's private life, but was curious about what could cause him consternation.

"Zico from Nier Darts called in, master."

Iason's eyes assumed a hard glint.

Zico was a deep undercover operative in the service of Tanagura. His youthful exterior hid the reality of the seasoned professional.

The only reason Tanagura suffered Nier Darts to exist was because it served to draw in espionage services from offworld Where they could be closely monitored.

"Master, the contract was to find what relationship exists between the underworld and the Guardians."

"Interesting." Belying the voice, Iason's eyes were cold, but even Iason couldn't ignore this information.

"And who did the contract originate from?"

"Guy, master."

Iason's eyes widened for a brief second and he laughed.

"A slumdog once again defying expectations."

Maybe it was to be expected—or only for Riki and his crew from Bison. It was all too familial to Eos. Mimea. Daryl. Katze. Even Iason.

Raoul called it *the beast gene*—Aisha termed it a virus.

"Guy is closer to the truth, master."

For Katze, this was an unexpected turn of events. Guy was persistent. Katze hadn't expected the situation to develop so quickly but Guy, let alone his crew, would not be readily silenced. Katze breathed a sigh of regret.

Katze had never met Guy in person. All he knew was the profile, and that he once was on intimate terms with Riki and was his second-in-command of Bison when that slum gang still ruled the streets of Ceres.

"Well, no matter. Instruct Zico to feed him whatever will keep him sated. Nothing that will point at the truth."

"If that does not suffice, master, then what?"

"It is for Zico to ensure it is sufficient," Iason replied acidly.

In front of Iason, Katze's old sear on his cheek burned. This burning sensation was fear, which struck Katze down to the marrow. It was forever etched into his very identity.

Katze couldn't escape this. It was forever an inescapable, unavoidable part of his being. One look from Iason was enough to remind him of it.

"Do you understand, Katze?" The voice was quiet but ruthless.

"Yes, master."

"Then back to the discussion prior: What do you think?"

Katze was startled. Never did Katze ever expect Iason to ask for his advice on anything. Usually, such questions were confirmation of intent on the part of Iason. This was different: Iason was actually asking for Katze's opinion.

Being commanded was easy. Once orders were in hand, all that remained was to execute them. But here there was no clear objective, no right answer. Katze was at a loss. Iason's countenance was unreadable.

Katze chose his words carefully.

"Master, this is no place to relieve boredom."

"Then a four-year break is too great to bridge?"

"Master, do you believe Eos would permit such an act to take place?"

Katze was Iason's furniture. Intimately familiar with the workings of Eos, he understood that what Iason—even as one of the most powerful of Blondies—suggested was reckless.

Iason was perfection incarnate. His immortal, sculpted physique, his vast intellect, his capacity for reason—Iason was the organic and inorganic ascended to godhood. Of all the elites of Tanagura, Iason was the foremost of all Blondies.

A Blondy now called a freak obsessed with a slumdog.

Iason thought nothing of it.

This lack of concern for his reputation was what rendered Katze speechless.

One random encounter had changed everything. Just one. Perhaps it was too much to call it fate, but it certainly couldn't be called a random occurrence. Not after all that had transpired. Iason and Riki's relationship and the complexity of it—Katze saw it firsthand. And it never ceased to shake his certainty in everything.

"Put aside your concerns. I want to know what you think."

Katze knew it was pointless to delay the answer further.

"Rehabilitation is possible, but there is no sense in thinking of this in other terms. There is no merit to this otherwise. It is a risk you can ill afford, master."

Iason smirked, as if he already knew the answer from the start.

"A life of just eating, sleeping and sex scares him, Katze."

Katze held his breath. A pet telling his master in such terms was unfathomable.

"He said he would rather take his chances in the underworld than live out the rest of his days caged in Eos. Riki asked me to set him free. Riki, who has never asked me for a single thing."

As Iason's furniture, Katze remembered his imperative: *Pets should be unseen and unheard, unless I will it otherwise.*

This was the Iason that Katze remembered.

But that was before Iason met Riki. Before Iason became obsessed with the defiant slumdog. But this... this went beyond what Katze could even imagine.

"I do not mind releasing him into the underworld. Of course, under your supervision."

Katze was speechless.

This was impossible.

This had to be some kind of waking dream.

Iason bringing personal feelings into this was inconceivable.

Could this be Iason Mink?

Katze's pulse quickened and his mind reeled. There had to be a reason for this. Some necessity, some urgency. *What could it be?*

"Master, did something happen in Eos?"

Iason answered in clipped tones. "Riki will be released from Eos."

Katze was mystified by this response. Iason had taken Riki back into Eos barely four months ago.

"Master, are you going to be keeping Riki as a pet outside of Eos?"

"Correct."

Impossible.

"Where, master?"

"Apatia."

Katze's voice rose, trembling. "Apatia?"

In Midas, the only Area where personal property was permitted.

Katze was speechless.

Two weeks later.

Iason's shocking words refused to leave Katze's mind.

Katze was sorting out datastreams when the holophone opened a channel.

Iason.

"Master." Katze bowed.

"Riki is to be released from Eos." Without preamble, Iason stated it as fact.

"To Apatia, master?"

Iason nodded.

"Then what we've discussed is to be put into effect, master?"

"To rehabilitate his instinct for survival is to take precedence."

"Has Riki been informed of this, master?"

Katze was no longer astonished by any of this. He had had enough time to consider the impossible. "Master, is this what you want?" Katze needed to know if only for his peace of mind. "Riki outside of Eos might create a situation."

"If he is not known as my pet once outside of Eos, then it is of no consequence."

In other words, Iason expected to terminate Riki if he betrayed his expectations.

Katze shivered. Regardless of his obsession, he had never ceased to be calculating and utterly ruthless.

"I entrust him to your care, Katze. Keep him quiet."

"Master, what if his very presence becomes an issue?"

"Better he die outside than in Eos."

The soft dulcet tones of Iason made Katze doubt the merciless quality of those words only for a second.

"Do this for me, Katze."

The holochannel cut off.

Katze slumped into a chair, exhausted.

Riki. You have brought Tanagura's mightiest Blondy to the edge of ruin. Is this what you planned all along?

Chapter 9

Ceres. The same day.

"What the fuck."

It was still daylight, but Luke was well on his way to getting trashed on stout.

"Guy—Kirie was seared to fucking death, right? That Guardian kid of his he was fucking went crazy, right? None of this makes fucking sense," Luke talked into his drink. "Better for the Guardians to just release a statement that they're doing mercy killings. Just make it fucking public, why not."

"Shut the fuck up, Luke." Norris bit down on synthfood.

Sid sat quietly in agreement.

Guy sighed.

"The question is where the money comes from. Kirie was after it and he fucked up."

For Kirie to use sexual advantage as leverage wasn't the issue, even if it was an underage boy in the care of the Guardians. Not that Guy and what remained of Bison would ever do such a thing. Kirie was great at finding scores. If only he'd had more character to him, he could have made a solid name for himself.

But this... this was unspeakable.

Taking a swig off his nonalcoholic drink, Guy remembered what Zico told him.

Zico's representative contacted them two weeks after the initial meeting and Guy and Luke found themselves back in Nier Darts. They thought everything would be clear and hoped this frustration

and confusion would be gone, that Zico had the answers they were looking for.

What they heard was beyond the pale.

Looking straight at both of them, Zico said: "Psychologists in the employ of the Guardians administer euthanasia to those under their care."

The words were loaded.

Psychologists.

Euthanasia.

The two words didn't belong to each other and obviously didn't add up.

Zico continued, "The remains are harvested and sold in the underworld for income."

It was as if Guy and Luke were both punched in the face.

"What the fuck?!"

"That's a fucking lie!"

Both of them slammed their hands on the table, but there was no denying Zico's words.

As if expecting such a reaction, Zico smiled. "You said it yourself—there is a connection between the underworld and the Guardians. Are you surprised?"

Neither of them wanted to know.

Zico's information was beyond imagining.

Thinking about it made their heads hurt.

Zico went on, "Do you remember the game called Dreamcatcher that was popular in the slums not too long ago? The one that caused permanent brain damage?"

Guy and Luke both nodded. It was an online hologame, sold only in Ceres. The lack of leisure pursuits in the slums made it insanely popular. Every connection to the neural network had two or three sets.

The problem was that Dreamcatcher was addictive—and it caused permanent brain damage over time. After a number of fatalities rocked Ceres, the game quietly vanished.

There was a rumor that Midas was using slumdogs as test subjects for a mind control experiment. No one knew the truth of it. No one dared to ask.

"There is an enhanced version of it being used."

"Enhanced?"

Zico manipulated a hidden dataslate on his divan and projected a holoscreen.

"This enhanced version introduces nanites into the brain stem. These create the illusion that whatever is being dreamt by the subject—any dream—is entirely real."

Guy said, "Wait, so you can die not in your sleep but in your dreams?"

"Yes, quite peacefully."

Luke glared.

"The endorphins released from the brain are harvested. They have a rejuvenative effect on organic cells and are quite valuable on the market," Zico effortlessly explained, then laughed. "Please don't glare at me. I am just conveying the information... If you do not like it would you like a discount?"

"Endorphins?" Luke asked.

Zico nodded. "Using stem cells is an absolute waste. Females are too valuable a commodity; no pregnancy would be terminated to harvest the fetus for them. It is entirely too inefficient from a cost

standpoint alone."

There was no emotion in Zico's voice.

But there was truth to Zico's words. The population of Ceres was 99 percent male. Women were priceless, taken care of from birth until death.

No—in truth they were a commodity, a resource to be sequestered and managed to become birth machines.

What did any of this mean?

Zico continued. "For the right price, there is cryosleep. Even a cybernetic body. Euthanizing the poor for harvest is not unusual in the least."

Whether it was the truth or not, Guy had no way of knowing. Ceres was shut out from any and all neural networks.

"Even those in Ceres no doubt want to die in peace."

"Even if they know they are to be harvested?!" Luke shouted.

Zico shrugged. "No one should care what happens to their body after death, no?"

The thought of having his body cut up into usable parts filled Guy with revulsion.

"For the poor, they can die contentedly in a dream state. People are worth money dead. Euthanizing is not cost-free. Moralizing the issue does not make death any more pleasant," Zico said in flat tones.

For slumdogs, being under the Guardians was the only peaceful time of their lives.

It was where they were raised until the age of thirteen in education centers. Those memories of childhood sustained them in the squalor and misery of the slums. Even if those memories were more pleasant than they really were. The Guardians provided shelter.

Solace.

The truth of what happened under the Guardians shook Guy and Luke to the core.

There were things people did not want to know.

There were truths people couldn't handle.

"I wonder if Riki knew," Norris mumbled. "Maybe that's why he changed the way he did."

Everyone met eyes.

Wordlessly the eyes lowered, each lost in his own thoughts.

Chapter 10

The room was quiet save for moaning.

Heated breath and cool whispers blended together into one.

In the indistinct lighting on the bed the air was heavy. Riki's desperate pleas added to the depravity and the heat swirled around the room.

Riki's brow glistened with sweat. His fingers grasped the sheets, trembling. His lips shone in the dark, limbs taut and stretched out.

His throat stifled a moan. The heat of the moment sank into his hips like fangs.

Riki choked down his cries and his body twisted and turned, but the blond head on his hips did not move.

The sound of Iason's tongue did not end. It flicked across Riki's flesh relentlessly.

Where.

What.

And how.

Iason knew every last inch of Riki's body.

Riki stiffened, back arching in spasms. The nectar of his body gushed. Iason's tongue assaulted him. Riki's eyes rolled into the back of his head. He could not resist.

Iason pushed his fingers deep into Riki. The fire coursed through his spine.

Riki's body submitted to pleasure, reason left his senses, and sexual desire came to the fore. The weight of erotic sensations wrapped themselves around him and crushed his heart in their grip.

Riki's vision turned red and he was lost to the world.

Even ambrosia becomes poison in excess. Iason was that to Riki.

Riki shivered from his crotch to his fingertips, unable to stifle his moans.

Trapped by Iason's mouth, Riki's whole body spasmed again.

Iason's throat greedily, lecherously drank.

In his first year as a pet in Eos, this indoctrination—Daryl was called to perform it.

Humiliation and ecstasy coursed through Riki's mind until it went white.

Riki didn't consider the act of sex with another man shameful, but his indoctrination as a pet in Eos was torture. After the first Bacchanalia, when the pet ring was placed on Riki, Daryl was never called to perform on Riki again—but Iason himself never put his mouth on Riki's flesh other than to mark it painfully. Iason's preference was to dominate. And Riki resisted, in resisting the urge to give in to pleasure or pain.

In Eos, sex between pets was called breeding. There was no shame, no attachment, just coitus between male and female pets.



Riki was permitted at first to pleasure himself in lieu of being

submitted for breeding, but one day Iason forbade that without warning. After that Iason paid personal attention to his pet, and Riki was violated over and over again.

Other pets loved to flaunt love bites, but Riki could never feel that way. And since Iason forbade Riki from pleasuring himself, Iason drank the nectar from Riki's flesh himself.

It was more frequent than the other ways in which Iason violated him—but the pain was infinitely worse. Even when drained completely, Iason would not stop. No matter if Riki resorted to pleading for mercy.

No.

It was no use turning away.

No more.

Iason held him down. Riki spasmed in pain over and over again.

Violated to his core, sentenced to become Iason's pet—slave to Iason's ruthless sexual avarice and his untiring, sculpted cybernetic physique.

Riki was ripped apart, deeper and deeper.

The pleasure was endless.

The ecstasy knew no end.

Until Iason, Riki never knew such sensations. His entire body rocked and went numb.

Once Iason made him his... Riki couldn't think of anything that could compare.

The thought struck fear in him in a way nothing else did.

When Riki had escaped to the slums, he was afraid. Afraid anyone he touched could not compare to Iason. Afraid he would become what he'd been in Eos in all his shameless depravity. Riki wanted to

purge the memory, the sensations, everything from the very essence of his being. At least Riki thought the monotony of the slums would help him forget.

Iason's hypnotic voice. His searing touch.

Riki loathed himself for wanting it.

And now. In Apatia.

Iason came to Riki.

Riki knew his body was starving. He understood this. And gave in.

Riki was willing to give up his freedom. For enslavement, to be touched.

The years of absence had changed not only Riki, but Iason.

Iason placing his mouth on Riki was proof enough.

It had never happened before. Iason administered bites and kisses, but had never taken the most intimate parts of Riki into his mouth. That was Iason's final line as a Blondy, the one he would never cross.

Until now.

Riki thought as Iason's pet he had experienced every aspect of shame. He was wrong.

Riki had been violated in every conceivable way as a pet to break him. Daryl had been part of this process. Riki had no way of knowing that involving furniture in sexual training directly was unheard of in Eos, but this had been Iason's design from the start.

Iason's mouth on Riki generated waves of shame and denial Riki didn't know he could still feel.

Stop.

Riki fought with Iason.

No. Stop.

It was futile. Riki ceased to be able to think in terms of words. Just a flick of Iason's tongue sent Riki screaming and made him spasm. His sides ached. Riki felt pain he didn't think was possible. His voice broke.

Iason was persistent and ruthless. He sucked every last drop out of Riki. He took Riki's testes into his mouth, sucking each jewel one after the other. Riki was held down by Iason's arms, unable to resist. Riki shuddered and he felt himself hanging on the edge of consciousness.

Pain became pleasure, one indistinguishable from the other.

Here in Apatia, there was no Cal. It was just Iason.

No. No. No.

Riki didn't think he would ever leave Eos. Iason escorted him out on a leash and Riki remained ignorant of the destination. He went inside a grav elevator reserved only for Blondies, underground to a waiting aircar that brought them straight to Apatia.

When he saw Katze there, Riki understood. Apatia—and the underworld—was where Riki now belonged.

Flashback. Medical room.

Get me out of Eos, shouted Riki.

If I'm going to die as a slave in Eos, then let me die in the underworld. Outside.

Riki had said it on impulse, not thinking it would become this.

There had to be a reason for this. Riki started thinking about it and came to the answer.

Knowing that all furniture in Eos was culled from the Guardians and were in essence slumdogs—knowing this secret made it impossible to keep Riki in Eos.

And as such, Apatia was his new cage. That was the will of Iason.

Of this, Iason said nothing.

Now.

Iason finished sucking Riki dry. The sensation of numbness remained.

Riki's breathing was ragged, his pulse quickened. His thoughts were steady, though his head was wrapped in vertigo.

The heaviness on his hips was gone. Riki knew Iason had released him. Catching his breath, Riki wiped the sticky hair from his brow. His hand shook. His body was still rocked by spasms.

Riki's hand went to his crotch. He'd already orgasmed three times.

Iason reached over and kissed him. Riki immediately went erect. Waves of shame and denial washed over him.

The fire building inside Riki was intolerable.

Please just do it.

Iason twisted his nipples.

Riki begged.

Please.

He was long past caring.

Riki wasn't used to begging for pleasure, and Iason savored the moment.

For a Blondy, pleasure was a right, to be taken at will. Iason had

never needed so much as a nod of consent.

Iason desired to subjugate Riki. To make him beg and finally bend Riki entirely to his will.

"You want more?" Iason whispered in his ear.

Riki wordlessly turned his back towards Iason.

Iason placed his hands on Riki's back. The heat made Riki gasp as if his blood was igniting where his skin met Iason's hands.

And then Riki's crotch shivered again.

No!

Riki covered himself with his hands. Iason brushed them aside and took hold of Riki's manhood.

"You are ready again." Iason's voice was a cool whisper across Riki's ear. "You want it inside?"

Riki bit his lip.

"You cannot sleep like this." Iason flicked his tongue across Riki's earlobe.

Riki shivered and hardened in Iason's palm. There was no hiding it.

What the fuck is the matter with me? What's happening to me?

Riki closed his eyes.

Iason's lips ceased to smile.

It was the Muir.

Muir was a slow-acting aphrodisiac wine. It was a very rare liqueur used to train pets and stimulate them for Bacchanalia and breeding patties.

After Riki's second orgasm, Iason used it to quench Riki's parched throat by passing it from mouth to mouth. Riki drank greedily, unaware of what it was. Having never received it before, he knew neither the taste of Muir nor what it would do to his body and his mind.

Iason usually didn't require an aphrodisiac with Riki. Without it, Iason could dominate Riki regardless. But for reasons which Iason did not quite understand yet or chose not to, he decided to act on impulse.

Iason cared not for his status as at Blondy. The power, the prestige. Desire—to dominate, to subjugate, to possess—took hold of him and filled his thoughts. Desire for Riki's exquisite, frail, organic flesh. And envy for the sensations that Iason himself could never feel.

He, a Blondy, immortal in all but name, envious of flesh condemned to mortality?

Was it so?

Even if he understood passion as an intellectual exercise and felt it in some sense in his still-organic brain, Iason couldn't feel the ecstasy that consumed Riki.

Blondies such as Iason held the power of life and death. Slumdogs such as Riki were bought, sold and discarded. That was the rule of nature.

Aisha's cold stare.

You're going to keep your pet in Apatia? Are you mad?

Gideon's incredulous tone.

Why do you corrupt yourself like this, Iason? This I cannot understand.

Raoul's stern warning.

Wake up, Iason. Your vices will be the death of you.

Orphe.

Apatia. So that is your end.

Those last words brushed against Iason's mind. *An end to what? Ego? Reason? Desire without restraint?*

To fall from the heavens, to spiral out of control, to reach the end—

It was to find the answer that Iason resorted to using Muir. Without thought or reason, maybe inside Riki and his mortality there was something to be shared, some answer Iason would find.

Knowing it was likely futile.

Iason lived for dominance. It was the very essence of his existence. It was the only way for Iason to be himself.

Epilogue

His ragged black hair on the white sheets, Riki cried out. His voice shaking, he screamed.

No matter where Iason touched him, his nerves caught on fire and sent him into ecstasy. Endless pleasure on top of endless pleasure.

Muir had turned Riki into at thrall to these sensations. The sight of Riki in heat pleased Iason's senses.

Iason pushed Riki's legs apart with his elbows, laying him bare and defenseless.

Riki still glistened. Having orgasmed three times, the flesh was a light pink. Iason placed his lips on it.

Just that touch made Riki arch. His sphincter tightened.

Iason opened him with his tongue and inserted his fingers slowly. Riki started shivering uncontrollably.

If there was no pet ring, Riki would lose control.

Iason carefully inserted one, two, three fingers. Riki's flesh stretched to accommodate them. Sensing Riki was ready, Iason drew his fingers out and slowly thrust himself inside.

Riki's throat bulged but Iason did not stop. If he stopped, he knew Riki would hurt more. Iason waited for Riki's breathing to steady.

Iason was patient; he knew if he just violated Riki by force he would resist.

With patience, Riki would transform into something else. Iason knew this. It was why he never put Riki in breeding parties, because he wanted to train Riki himself and guide this transformation of Riki's body, to sculpt his flesh and his desire.

Riki twisted his hips. Iason's hardness entered into him and thrust

against his vitals.

The pressure rose in Riki's chest. It was pain bordering on intoxication.

Riki held his breath. It was ecstasy he'd never known before.

There was no reason, no pride, no deception. Riki's eyes ignited.

Iason reached the heights of intoxication. He looked into Riki's eyes and saw the colors of an eclipse.

There was desire, then there was passion. Ablaze, it knew no limits.

Afterword

Greetings!

This is the newly printed edition of *Ai No Kusabi*, Volume 7. From here onwards (laughter), it will be all original content. Rather than taking the previous hardcovers and just editing them for content, it might be more or less an entirely new book? Well, according to the schedule, it wasn't supposed to be this long. Once I started on it I couldn't stop (laughter) and with Volume 6, it was half original content as it turned out. I can hear everyone telling me I always do that from here.

Once it went into definitive collection, I thought this would be the last chance to really put touches on this milieu, especially the part where Riki is forced out of Eos into Apatia. The inspiration for that came from Drama CDs 2 and 3, which went into depth on Riki's three years as a pet that the novellas didn't have (really, there's a lot in those CDs. FOUR of them? Wow). Since Riki found out he and the furniture shared the same origins and came back, this changes everything—right?

If you enjoy this new version—well if you do, I will be happy if you do.

As for the anime DVD, yesterday there was the voice recording for the second episode: it's proceeding well. It's really quite interesting, though I can imagine how difficult it must be for the staff.

That, and well, in CHARA there is a bonus anime DVD in the latest issue now on sale. The DVDs are to be released next spring, but the staff is really working hard on it—and this is kind of like proof in a way? Well, it's really very gorgeous and well done, especially Iason (laughter).

It's just footage and not an episode or anything, but this is how the DVD version will turn out, so everyone please go check it out. There is also a special side story of DOUBLE HELIX in this month's CHARA

as well.

I'm sorry about always mentioning this at the end, but Mr. Saichi Nagato, thank you as always. The Volume 4 color illustration of Blondies in Black (wow) was absolutely a-ma-zing. It makes me want to see all thirteen of them in their uniforms. If there's a chance for it, please? Oh? No? Not happening? Pretty please then? (Begs)

I've run out of space now. Until next time!

Rieko Yoshihara

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